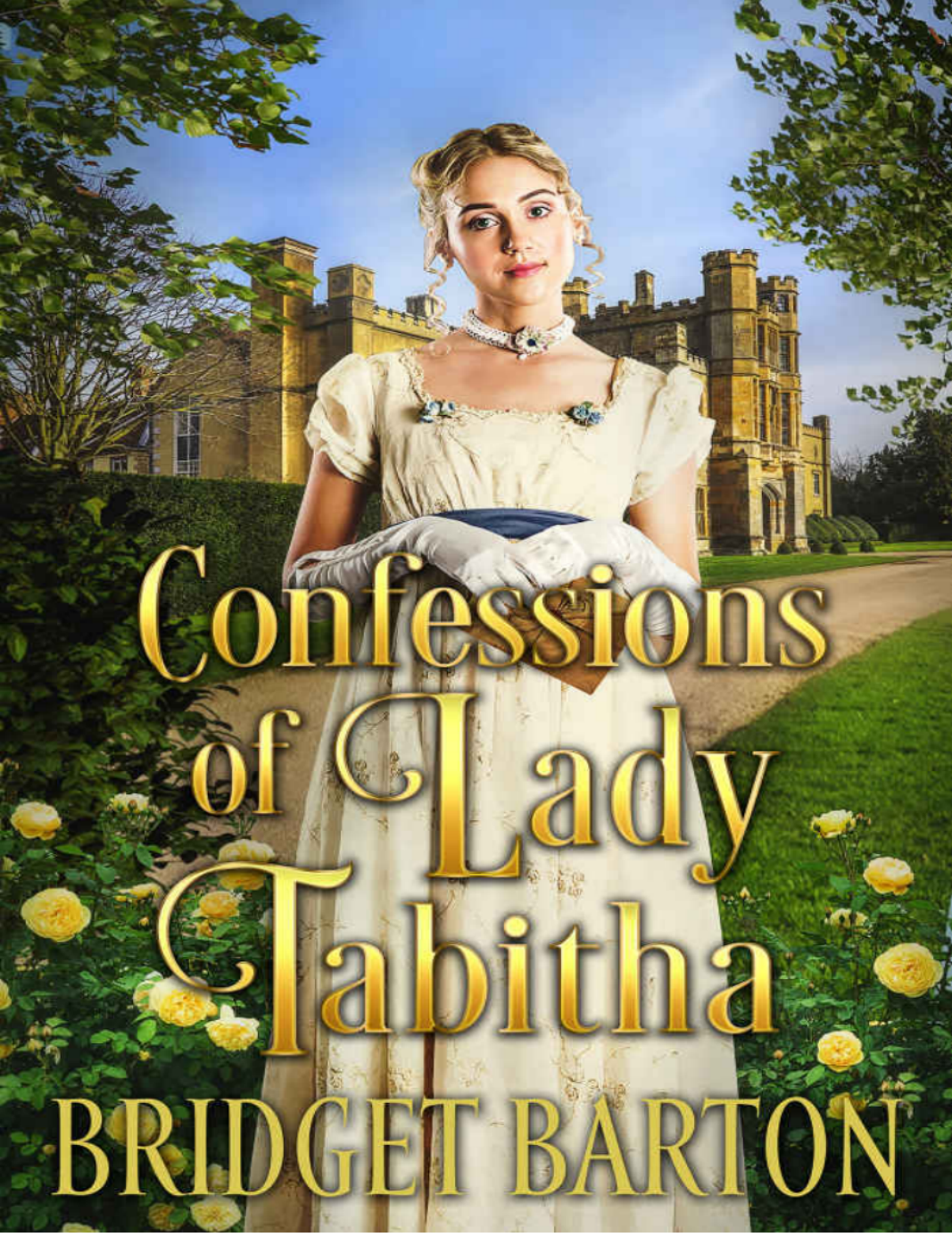

Confessions
of Lady
Tabitha
BRIDGET BARTON

Confessions of Lady Tabitha

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

BRIDGET BARTON

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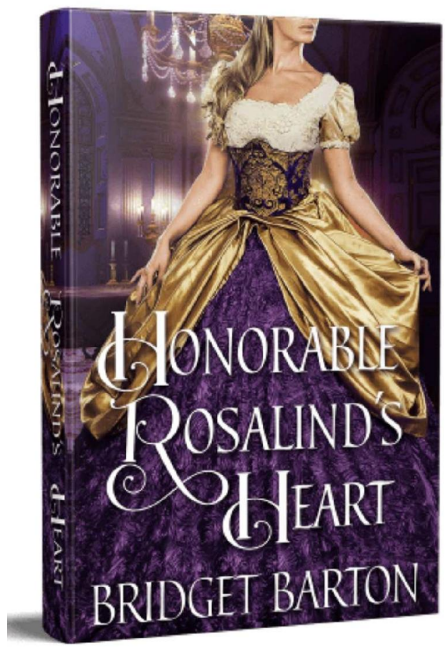
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Confessions of Lady Tabitha

Introduction

Lady Tabitha Browning dreams of meeting her one true love and having a blissful married life. When she meets Leo Whittier, the Marquess of Bazeley, she is flattered by his attention and charm, until she discovers the dark side of him... Tabitha feels devastated when her father announces that she is to marry this cold-hearted man no matter what. With desperation haunting her every step, Tabitha turns to Jeremy Gibbs, her father's steward, who will soon steal her heart…

Will Tabitha dare to defy high society's rules for her one true love?

Jeremy Gibbs knows very well that no good can come from loving a duke's daughter, but the heart plays painful games… When he finds out about Tabitha's engagement, his heart breaks into pieces. However, after discovering that the Marquess is a scoundrel, he doesn't hesitate to put his job and reputation on the line to rescue her. With time running out, will Jeremy find a way to escape from a hopeless impasse?

If only fighting for a forbidden love was not a road full of dangerous thorns...

Despite the terrible circumstances, Jeremy and Tabitha savour the precious time they spend together. Still, class differences and a threatening antagonist are just some of the hurdles Jeremy and

Tabitha must overcome in order to unite their two separate worlds. Will Jeremy and Tabitha fight the odds and prove that love conquers all? Or will the cruel fate of reality tear them apart forever?

Chapter 1

The hum of chattering guests and softly playing music drew Tabitha like a butterfly to the sweetest nectar. Her soul mate was surely in this room, and she was ready to meet him.

Turning to her father, she called out to him, but he didn't seem to hear. The duke appeared focused ahead and a little troubled.

"Papa?"

He looked down, a slight frown marring his usually jovial face. "Yes, my dear?"

"Is something amiss?"

"No," her father replied, his frown deepening for a second before smoothing away until only his permanent lines remained. "Why do you ask?"

"You appear to be concerned about something. Is there someone you're looking for?"

"Oh, hush, dear," her mother admonished. "Your father is merely thinking about your success. This is your very first ball, after all, and we wish you to make a good impression."

Tabitha could understand that. She was just as concerned about this ball, but her excitement far outweighed any undesirable emotions.

"Do not fret, Papa," Tabitha assured him. "I will not do anything to bring shame to our family."

The duke affectionately patted her hand resting on his forearm. "I know, dear. 'Tis a father's prerogative to fuss about his daughter's first ball. Do you have your dance card with you? I have a few suggestions for your partners, particularly your first dance."

This piqued Tabitha's interest. "Oh? Who would that be?"

"Lord Bazeley," her father announced. "It's unfortunate I cannot see him yet. Perhaps he hasn't arrived."

Tabitha had never heard about this man, but he was important enough that her father knew him and wanted her to dance with him.

"Who is he, Papa? A friend?"

"Something like that. He is a distinguished marquess and well-respected by his peers."

Which meant he would probably be old and unattractive. Tabitha's heart sank. She had hoped her first dance would be with a handsome

man who was both young and an accomplished dancer.

Tabitha was often told by her friends that she was a gifted and graceful dancer and was eager to make it known during her first Season. Everybody would surely admire her and say wonderful things about her nimble feet and youthful gaiety.

Looking around, Tabitha noticed how people observed her openly. Shyness refused her to gaze upon them with as much frankness, but she was secretly pleased. She was not in any way vain about her beauty, but Tabitha was aware of its effect on others. There was seldom a room she walked into where people did not pause their conversation and watch her.

She presumed it was the combination of her golden hair and emerald-green eyes surrounded by fair skin and almost permanently flushed cheeks that drew their appreciative gazes. Tabitha's mother often commented that Tabitha's *joie de vivre* maintained her rosy cheeks and delicate features, making her appear younger than her nineteen years. Mandee's opinion was altogether different.

The handmaiden, and Tabitha's closest friend, attributed Tabitha's appearance to her mischievous deeds and playful manner. Whichever it was, it worked in Tabitha's favour.

"Alfred," her mother began, "I feel a tad parched, and I'm sure Tabitha is as well. Why don't you get us some wine, and we'll find somewhere to sit?"

The duke agreed, weaving his way through a small crowd as Tabitha and her mother went in the opposite direction. Sitting areas had been set up along the walls of the vast ballroom, and while most were

already occupied, they managed to find a comfortable spot beside the Dowager Countess of Windbatten.

Tabitha found the old woman rather odd but interesting. Her father often called the dowager senile, but Tabitha disagreed. The woman's mind was sharp and observant, but her peculiar ways made her seem forgetful, frail, and someone not many wished to be around. They put up with the dowager, but most people avoided her at all costs. Fortunately, Tabitha's mother liked the older woman and didn't mind sitting beside her.

"It took you long enough to arrive, Trina," the dowager expressed sharply as soon as they drew up to her. "I have been alone for some time."

"I assumed you were not coming this evening," Tabitha's mother explained. "You were rather vocal about not being amongst 'fuddy-duddies'."

Tabitha giggled at the word. The dowager used it to describe the *Ton* despite being part of the very same society.

"I decided to come and observe how foolish everyone has become since I last saw them," the woman declared, casting twinkling eyes at Tabitha. "It will give me something to laugh about when I return to Surrey. Have you seen Fletcher's girl? She looks like a fluffy cloud of dribble."

Tabitha's mother looked around, placing a warning hand on the woman's frail wrist. "Do not speak so loudly, Countess. Someone might hear you."

“But look at her,” the dowager insisted. “Is she not ridiculous with those puffy sleeves and ruffles that do nothing to hide her unsightly double chin?”

Tabitha looked at the old woman’s own chin, watching the excess skin shake whenever the dowager spoke.

“Do not look at me like that, Tabitha,” the dowager warned. “I wasn’t always like this. I was much like you when I was younger, but with dark hair and blue eyes. Suitors fell at my feet just to dance with me. Where are your dance partners?”

Tabitha took no notice of the woman’s scathing words, finding them without bite. “Perhaps I am not as beautiful as you were, My Lady.”

“So speaks the girl who has attracted every male’s gaze since she walked into the room. I noticed how everyone’s eyes turned to the entrance. I knew it was you even though I couldn’t see you from where I’m sitting.”

Tabitha knew the woman didn’t expect a thank you in return. The dowager had said it matter-of-factly, not intending to compliment.

The women eventually fell into easy conversation until Tabitha’s father’s arrival. The man immediately baulked when he saw who Tabitha and her mother sat beside but continued to draw closer, albeit unwillingly.

“Countess,” he said by way of greeting. “You’re looking well.”

The old woman raised her eyebrows. “Don’t you mean senile?”

The duke’s cheeks reddened. “No, not at all. Have you come alone?”

“My son and daughter-in-law are somewhere in the room,” the woman replied. “Do you have a glass for me?”

Tabitha’s father looked down at the three glasses in his hands, his face a mask of internal struggles. Finally, he handed one to the dowager and the others to Tabitha and her mother.

“How kind of you, Alfred,” the old woman remarked. “Where is yours?”

“I was just about to get one,” the duke answered, his voice strained. “Please excuse me.”

Tabitha’s poor father bowed to the woman and left them only to return moments later with a dashingly handsome man at his side. The tall, fair man looked at her and smiled, causing Tabitha to blush and look down.

“I see you’ve come out of your hole, Bazeley,” said the dowager.

Tabitha's head jerked upward. Bazeley? The very same man her father had spoken about? Why, the marquess wasn't ugly or old!

"Good evening, Lady Windbatten," the man said, bowing before the old woman. "You look particularly lovely today."

The dowager snorted. "My husband would say differently. He hates navy and would rather see me in pink. Awful colour."

Everyone grew silent. The dowager's husband had been dead for several years, and yet the woman spoke of him as though he were still alive. This was one of the reasons why many considered the woman to be senile.

"Lord Windbatten has wonderful taste," said Tabitha, filling the awkward silence. "Pink looks wonderful against your dark hair. I cannot wear it as you can. Blue is more my colour."

This evening, Tabitha wore a white silk dress with short sleeves and gold edging along the bodice, sleeves, and hemline. Her mother thought it was important to appear as young and vibrant as possible as all men seemed to prefer women with a more youthful appearance. White was supposed to achieve just that, although Tabitha would have selected a light blue dress or perhaps something in green.

Her father cleared his throat, gaining their attention. "Tabby, this is Leo Whittier, the Marquess of Bazeley. He has asked for the very first dance."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Browning," the marquess said,

bowing before her. “Your father is indeed right about asking for this dance. It would be an honour to be your first partner.”

Tabitha felt obliged to get to her feet, curtsying in turn. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, My Lord. I will add your name to my dance card,” she promised.

“You have made a poor soul a happy man, Lady Browning,” Lord Bazeley claimed. “I will return shortly for that dance.”

Tabitha’s father offered to walk the marquess back to wherever he had found the man, his eager form disappearing alongside Lord Bazeley into the group of people ahead. The marquess had to be an important man to have gained the attention of the duke, yet this was the first she had heard of him.

Tabitha had to admit that the man reeked of elegance and excellent manners and was attracting a fair bit of attention as well. She put down the admiring gazes to his fair hair and light blue eyes, a favourite combination for most.

“He cuts a striking figure, doesn’t he?” her mother commented, looking at her with a smile.

Tabitha suddenly became interested in her glass of wine, feeling her cheeks grow hot under her mother’s playful gaze. She had a feeling the duchess had noticed her keen interest in the marquess but would never outright say it.

“Lord Bazeley will be a favourite this Season,” Tabitha finally said.

She glanced at the dowager, not surprised to see the woman asleep. “I expect she is dead to the world for another hour or so, Mama.”

“Or so,” the woman replied, her eyes sparkling. She knew Tabitha was avoiding discussing the marquess. “I’ll remain with her until Diana remembers she has a responsibility to her mother-in-law.”

Tabitha and her mother spoke quietly for some time, only pausing when the dowager gave a little snort of air or a soft snore. Tabitha was about to ask if she snored when music played announcing the first dance of the evening. Her belly fluttered as she sharply drew in breath. Lord Bazeley would appear any moment now and claim the right of her hand. As soon as she thought that, Tabitha’s mind started to spin with possibilities. Could Lord Bazeley be the man she was to marry?

He certainly fitted the physical description of a handsome man, and he was so polite. Her father evidently thought highly of him as well, which was promising. Perhaps it was too soon to know, so Tabitha decided to tuck her thoughts away until further into the Season.

Sure enough, Lord Bazeley appeared and swept her away amidst the admiring gazes of the guests. Tabitha heard a woman comment on how well she and Lord Bazeley suited, coaxing an unwanted blush out of her. Tabitha didn’t want to appear as though every compliment was reason to blush, or the marquess might think her too naïve.

“You look ravishing this evening, Lady Browning,” Lord Bazeley commented. “I daresay you’re the prettiest woman in this room!”

Tabitha smiled, hoping she looked gracious and not like a blushing fool. “Thank you, My Lord. That is kind of you to say.”

“Call me Leo,” he insisted. “I feel I shall see much more of you before the Season has ended.”

He had given her the use of his Christian name? Perhaps the marquess was interested in courting her! How did she feel about that? Lord Bazeley was handsome with excellent manners, which was as good a start as any for one’s first suitor. Suddenly shy, Tabitha lowered her eyes and nodded.

“It would be my honour to use your first name,” she said.

“That was so prettily said,” Leo replied. “It’s not so often that beauty, kindness, and respectability are seen in someone as young as you are. Your father mentioned you were nineteen.”

Tabitha beamed. She was making a great first impression! Her mother and father would be proud of her success.

“Yes ... Leo,” she said, hesitating briefly. “Would it be forward of me to ask your age?”

Tabitha knew one should never ask a woman her age, but she didn’t think the same rule applied to men.

“Thirty.”

Tabitha's eyes widened. She didn't expect the marquess to name such a great number. He was eleven years older than her! Tabitha had always imagined a youthful man as her life partner, yet Leo didn't look his age.

"Is there something wrong with my age?" Leo queried.

"None at all," Tabitha assured with little confidence. "You merely surprised me."

"That's a relief to hear," he said, his eyes full of amusement.

Tabitha looked away, wondering if she had undone all her success. But surely the opinion of a young woman shouldn't matter to a man of his calibre? He had to be wealthy to afford his nifty attire, and Tabitha's father wasn't one to waste his time with those whose wealth was significantly lower than his own.

To Tabitha's relief, the music ended. She curtsied, thanking Leo for the dance.

"No, thank you," he countered. "You were the perfect dance partner and put all the other women to shame. May I lead you back to your seat?"

"I would like that."

Leo tucked Tabitha's hand in the crook of his arm and parted a clear path through the crowd. People stood aside and stared as though the marquess demanded attention. Tabitha felt rather proud to be on his arm.

"Tabitha – may I call you that?" Leo asked.

"Yes, of course, you may," Tabitha readily agreed. "'Tis only fair as I now call you Leo."

Leo grinned, showing his slightly crooked teeth. It was good to see that he wasn't perfect. Imperfections brought character to one's face, but there had to be beauty to balance it.

"It's such a unique name," the marquess stated. "Almost as unique as the owner herself. I wonder if she would allow me to call on her this week?"

"C-call on me?" Tabitha stuttered.

My, things were moving along fast! Tabitha blushed profusely, forcing her hand to remain on Leo's forearm. She hadn't expected the marquess to be so quick about calling on her. That could only mean one thing. Such an elegant man was interested in courting her! Unless he had said it to be friendly?

"Put me out of my misery, Tabitha," the marquess urged. "I cannot come unless you will welcome me."

“Well, uh ...” she said, desperately finding the right words to say. “I have no objections, but allow me to ask my father first.”

Leo nodded, his expression pleased and smug. Had he been so confident that she would agree?

“I understand,” he said. “I shall personally speak to your father.”

Tabitha nodded, feeling a tiny bud of excitement unfurl and grow within her. This was only her first ball, yet she had her first interested suitor. It was more than any girl could hope for.

Leo returned her to her mother, but Tabitha only found a now wide-awake dowager. Tabitha thanked the marquess, watching him for a moment as he walked away.

“I hope you have not invested any thought or silly emotions on that man, Tabitha Browning,” the dowager said. “Bazeley is not the man for you.”

That was the last thing Tabitha had expected the countess to say. Most women would not question the remark, but Tabitha wasn’t most women. She wanted to know precisely what the dowager meant by her comment.

“Why? Do you think me too young and inexperienced?”

“You are as you should be. ’Tis him who is not good enough for you, dear. Take the word of an old woman: stay away from the marquess.”

The woman’s warning had an ominous ring to it. “But he is a wonderful man, My Lady,” Tabitha argued.

“Yes, my husband is a wonderful man,” the dowager replied. “None better can be found elsewhere.”

Had they not been talking about the marquess? “But what of Lord Bazeley, Lady Windbatten?”

The old woman’s wrinkled brow creased as her head tilted. “What of him, girl? Is he here?”

Perhaps the woman was senile after all, but Tabitha found it strange that the dowager would say such a specific and uncomplimentary remark about Leo.

An unsettling feeling stole over Tabitha, dimming her excitement. It was temporarily set aside when her mother returned and asked about her first dance with the marquess. Tabitha all but gushed about Leo’s agility, skill, and grace, likening him to a swan with the strength of a stag.

She didn’t mention that the marquess wished to call on her tomorrow, giving the man time to speak to her father. Tabitha found she wasn’t as keen to see him as she had initially been and knew it had to do with what Lady Windbatten had said.

The dowager never repeated her warning that evening, but Tabitha couldn't forget about it. Annoyed with herself for putting so much stock by what the old woman had said, Tabitha told herself to forget about it and enjoy the rest of the evening.

Later that night, she couldn't stifle a yawn as Mandee helped her remove her gown. The maid chuckled, carefully setting the garment aside before working on Tabitha's unmentionables.

"It must have been a good night to have tired you out," the woman remarked.

"Oh, it was magical, Mandee! I've never been to anything so grand. The dancing, the music, the guests ..."

Tabitha twirled away as soon as Mandee had removed the chemisette, performing one of the dances.

"And here I thought you were tired!" the maid exclaimed.

"I am fatigued, make no mistake, but 'tis the wonderful sort that gives one a burst of energy when required. I do not think I shall be able to sleep once my head hits the pillow. I'll lay awake all night thinking about everything and anything about the ball."

“Did you see anyone you know?” Mandee asked. “How many partners did you have?”

“My dance card was brimming with partners. Every eligible suitor wished to dance with me once Leo had claimed the first dance.”

Mandee’s eyebrows lifted. “Leo? And who might he be?”

Tabitha’s lips stretched wide in a telling smile. “Only the most handsome gentleman at the ball this evening. Most likely know him as Lord Bazeley, but he gave me the use of his Christian name during our first dance. He wishes to call on me tomorrow, you know. I was happy about it at first, but now ...” Tabitha shrugged. “I suppose I allowed Lady Windbatten’s words to affect me, and now I seem to think something isn’t right about him.”

Mandee opened her mouth, and after a moment’s hesitation, asked Tabitha to repeat the man’s name.

“Lord Bazeley,” Tabitha told her. “Leo was so attentive, kind, charming, and a wonderful dancer, but now my opinion of him has been somewhat tainted by what Lady Windbatten said. I do not know if she was in her right faculties when she spoke, but she warned me away from Leo, stating he wasn’t the man for me and that he wasn’t good enough. She changed the subject soon after and never said a word about it again, but I, unfortunately, haven’t forgotten about it. Silly of me, isn’t it? I suppose I’m worrying over nothing.”

“If only that were true,” Tabitha heard Mandee mutter under her breath.

“What do you mean by that?”

A pained expression crossed the young woman’s features before firm resolution promptly replaced it. Tabitha wondered what that was about. Mandee was usually a cheerful person, but she appeared disturbed by something.

“May I speak frankly?” Mandee asked.

“Yes, of course. You know that I never forbid you from speaking your mind.”

“That may change after what I have to say.”

“You’re going around the hill when you could just go over it,” Tabitha complained. “Speak plainly.”

Mandee spoke in one breath, her words running over each other. “I’m sorry to tell you that Lord Bazeley has an awful reputation. I have it on the best authority.”

Tabitha scrunched up her face, pulling her head back slightly. “You must have heard wrong. Leo has not exhibited any sort of unsightly behaviour.”

“I know. That is how he fools everyone but the ones he allows to see

his true character. I heard the servants gossiping about it several times before, and I always wondered who this man was. I'm not mistaken by claiming it's the same man who danced with you tonight. Lord Bazeley's own servants dislike and fear him. He is a dangerous fellow, Tabitha. You would do best to stay away from him."

Tabitha slowly sunk onto her bed, wrapping her arms around a bedpost. How could this be? If everything Mandee said was true, it was puzzling why her father allowed her to dance with Leo. Didn't her father know about the man's reputation?

"I know that you wouldn't lie or tell tall tales," said Tabitha. "But I must admit it's difficult to believe that the charming man I met tonight is the same man you speak of."

"I assure you it is," Mandee insisted. "Him coming to call on you does not bode well."

Perhaps that was why Tabitha continued to feel unsettled about the marquess. But how could an evil person hide their true nature under such beauty and charm?

"I think I shall not see him again," Tabitha decided. "I do not want such characters around me or my family."

"You have made the right choice," Mandee affirmed. "The likes of that man should never darken these hallways."

Hopefully, Leo would change his mind and not come to see her tomorrow.

Tabitha hoped in vain. The very next morning at eleven, she heard a chaise draw up to the house. Her tea in hand, Tabitha looked outside her parlour window, nearly dropping her cup when she saw who it was.

“Mandee!” she screeched.

The woman, who had been darning a dress, uttered an expletive when she jumped, pulling out the needle that had pierced her thumb.

“What in hades are you shouting for?” she scolded.

“Leo is here! I can’t let him see me, for goodness’ sake.”

The woman jumped to attention, flinging the dress to the side and running to the window.

“That is Lord Bazeley?” Mandee said with some admiration. “He is a handsome fellow. The Devil incarnate but handsome. Perhaps Lucifer looked like this before he disgraced himself and was thrown out of heaven.”

“You are not helping!” Tabitha cried. “He is evil, remember?”

“He certainly is.” Mandee pulled her head back, pushing Tabitha away from the window. “I think he saw me.”

Tabitha’s eyes widened. “Do you think he saw me?”

“No, but he is climbing down the chaise. You’ll have to run to your room and feign illness if you’re to avoid him. I’ll tell your father that the late evening has altered your health, and you require some peace and sleep.”

“Do I have to pretend to be sick?”

“No, simply remain out of sight for the day. Go now!”

Tabitha didn’t need to be told twice. She scurried out of the room, lifting her dress higher than she should as she took the stairs two at a time. Fortunately, no servants but Mandee were around to see her.

Tabitha heard the young woman chuckling before her laughter was abruptly killed by the appearance of the butler. The maid informed the man of Tabitha’s illness, requesting he communicate it to the duke. What would Tabitha’s father say once he found out about her ‘illness’?

“I wasn’t sick at breakfast,” Tabitha whispered to herself. “He might question it.”

Hiding behind the drapes of the second floor, Tabitha gestured at Mandee to join her.

“Now we wait,” the maid said, settling beside Tabitha.

Tabitha nodded, sucking in her breath when her father appeared. The butler spoke to him, immediately moving to the door when the knocker was banged. Leo walked in, thanking the butler while looking around the front hall as though he were taking inventory. Why would he do that? It seemed a tad rude to her.

Pursing her lips, Tabitha watched her father approach the marquess, warmly welcoming him and leading the way to the study. Mandee nudged her, wiggling her eyebrows and pointing. Giggling, Tabitha thought to make a smart remark when the marquess paused and looked up, his cold blue eyes instantly finding her. Tabitha sucked in her breath, feeling rooted to the floor as a cold chill travelled down her spine.

“What is it?” Mandee asked.

The woman’s voice was enough to break whatever spell Leo had woven through his eyes. Without a word, Tabitha turned and fled to her room.

Chapter 2

Jeremy leaned forward to give his horse an affectionate pat on the neck. Wolfe had been his first purchase with his first salary and belonged to no one else but him. That mattered a lot to him.

“You treat that horse better than most parents treat their children,” the duke remarked.

The man drew up to Jeremy, unnecessarily digging his heels into his horse’s sides. Jeremy winced, feeling sorry for the horse.

“The better you treat your animals, the more they will cooperate with you, Your Grace,” Jeremy replied.

“Force is enough to make any animal or person comply, Jeremy,” the duke countered. “Your coddling of that horse will only lead to sad disappointment when it turns on you.”

Jeremy didn’t bother arguing that a happy creature, be it human or animal, didn’t need an occasion to turn because of its good situation. Happiness left no room for anger or discontentment. More people would do well to understand that, but people were more inclined to do or believe the worst. Jeremy found that was the human nature of most.

“We have new tenants that have agreed to the rent,” Jeremy said instead. “That should significantly increase earnings from the land to the north of the estate. I was concerned that the landscape would

repel most farmers looking for land to rent, but Mr Seymour seems positive that the rocky area will be perfect for him."

The duke shot him a sidelong glance. "Did he come up with that conclusion, or did you convince him?"

Jeremy gave a ghost of a smile. "Perhaps I may have explained the merit of owning such land. He has signed a twelve-month lease, so he has plenty of time to discover the merits beneath the rocks."

The farmer was a rotten sort who had tried to trick Jeremy into lowering the rent of the land. Unfortunately for Mr Seymour, Jeremy was a stellar steward who had learnt much during his seven years working for the Duke of Storping. No one knew the Storping estate as well as he did.

The duke laughed. "Making you my steward was likely the best decision I ever made for my coffers. The agreement is probably so iron-clad that the man will never be able to get out of it until his twelve months are complete."

"There is no question there, Your Grace."

The duke gave another bark of laughter. "I must say that I missed your ability to amuse me while in London. I was glad to leave the place when I did."

The Brownings had returned some days ago, surprising Jeremy. The London Season had not ended yet, and indeed had months to go before concluding in August. This was not the way to go about finding

Tabitha a husband. Jeremy's chest tightened slightly, but he ignored the feeling. Some things were better left unsaid.

"Have you thought about my idea to extend the stables?" the duke asked.

"I have, and I think it a worthy idea for a future project," said Jeremy. "We do not have the capital to fund such an extension right now, but I expect we will in months to come. I've surveyed our own farms and decided that we could increase the crop yield by thirty per cent and sell the surplus to the vegetable vendors."

Jeremy had insisted on using a small part of the estate to plant vegetables and thereby lessen the amount spent buying fresh vegetables from vendors. His idea had cut costs by nearly ninety per cent, which made the duke's pockets significantly heavier. It had also given some poor town's people honest work and pulled them out of a life of thievery. The duke didn't know that Jeremy had hired petty thieves to work his land, and it had been a risk bringing the men in to tend the vegetable garden. However, the risk paid off because the men worked wholeheartedly and were simply grateful to have a steady income to put food on the table.

"If you think growing more vegetables will make me wealthier, then do so," said the duke. "However, I want to push the extension of the stables. I believe we'll have the funds needed sooner than you think."

Jeremy found the duke's words somewhat cryptic and surprising. What did the man know that he didn't? Jeremy knew the ins and outs of Storping Manor and its owners; nothing passed him by without his permission.

His Grace often gives his ideas, and I either approve them or put them on hold. He has always trusted my judgement. Why is he so insistent this time?

However, Jeremy knew his place and had to be careful about how he approached matters. There wasn't a noble alive who would not take offence to a servant going against his employer's orders. Jeremy may not be a lowly servant, but he wasn't of the gentry class either.

"I am more than ready to begin the project provided I have the funds for materials and labour, Your Grace."

The duke grinned, clearly pleased with himself. "I knew you would see it my way. I met a horse dealer while in London who promises to provide me with thoroughbreds at a fraction of the cost."

Jeremy struggled to conceal his dubious expression. Why on earth would a horse dealer part with a prized horse for less than the going rate?

"Can the man be trusted?" Jeremy asked.

"What a question to ask! Do you not think that I cannot tell a no-good swindler from an honest dealer?"

"That is not what I meant, Your Grace. Your powers of good judgement are second to none. I'm merely surprised that a dealer would offer you such a lowered price. What good is it to him to make no profit on a sale?"

The duke drew his eyebrows together, his moustache twitching. The man was thinking, which relieved Jeremy. The man was not to be trusted with anything to do with large quantities of money exchanging hands. Jeremy had learnt that the hard way some years ago.

"I'm certain the man is a legitimate horse dealer," the duke finally said.

"I do not doubt that, Your Grace," Jeremy assured, the lie falling effortlessly off his tongue. "I simply wonder at what he has to gain by selling the horses at a reduced amount. You say that you met him in London? How was your stay in the dubbed 'fashionable town'?"

Lying to soothe the ruffled feathers of an employer was an all-too-common occurrence among servants. It wasn't done maliciously, for the most part, but as a tool to avoid bursts of anger or unwarranted accusations that could lead to unemployment or worse. Jeremy avoided lies as much as he could, but the duke made it challenging. Changing the subject seemed to be the best thing to do.

The man hesitated, his eyes clouding with concern. Had the trip not gone well?

"London is as it always is during the Season. Everyone wishes to be seen and noticed; fortunes are gained and lost, alliances are formed ..." The man shrugged. "There is not much to tell."

Jeremy didn't believe that for a second. The duke had appeared eager to leave for London, boasting that he would become a success. Jeremy had wondered if he meant that he would be a successful parent if his

daughter managed to attract the attention of a worthy suitor. Jeremy couldn't think of any other reason. Travelling to the bustling town had been about Tabitha; that was what everyone knew.

"Did Lady Storping and Lady Browning enjoy their stay?"

"I imagine they did," the duke replied. "After all, they needn't worry about gains and losses at a card game. That is only for the man to bear."

Jeremy's heart sunk. Had Storping lost at the gambling tables again? The man had promised to steer clear of such things after Jeremy had warned him about the threat to the Storping estate.

I cannot ask him, or he will believe I am rising above my station. He is generally a fair man, but not even he will allow such a thing.

"True enough, Your Grace. What of Parliament? I hear that the Baron of Eshowe has taken his father's seat. Do you think it is permanent or a temporary solution while the old man recovers?"

The duke shook his head, chuckling. "I cannot fathom your fascination with politics, Jeremy. Why involve yourself with matters that will never concern you? 'Tis better to remain on your level than to acquire knowledge about politics. Leave that to the nobles."

The duke's comment stung. Jeremy knew not to take it personally, but he couldn't ignore his disappointment. If he had an opportunity such as holding a title or money, he would have taken up politics, fought his way to a seat, and argued the rights of the working class.

Parliament needed someone aware of the plight of those whose needs often, if not always, went unnoticed.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The pair fell into silence as they trotted leisurely through the estate. Jeremy pointed at improvements here and there, passed ideas by the duke, and spoke about the overall condition of the estate. He got along with Storping more than most servants did with their employers, which Jeremy attributed to sound decision-making and his ability to make money.

Looking to his left, Jeremy noticed Tabitha sitting on a swing he had made for her many moons ago. The old oak was Tabitha’s favourite tree, so the gift of a swing hanging from its sturdy branches had been well-received.

The woman appeared to be staring at the ground where her shoes dragged, lost in her own thoughts. Over time, the back and forward movement of feet had formed a groove in the ground that allowed for easier movement as Tabitha had grown taller. Well, she hadn’t grown too tall as she was just a petite young woman. So petite and beautiful that it sometimes hurt to look at her.

Tabitha chose that moment to look up, her eyes going from her father to Jeremy. Raising his hand to wave would likely make him look like an eager fool, so Jeremy nodded once instead. Tabitha smiled faintly in return before looking down again. That was odd of her.

Jeremy had always been helplessly mindful of Tabitha, covetously watching her from afar and only drawing near if a good opportunity arose. He knew her better than he knew anyone else, which was

unwise considering his feelings for her.

She tends to sit on the swing when troubled. Has something happened that I do not know about?

Tabitha was an open book, a carefree young woman who had nothing to hide because the world had not tainted her yet. She was undoubtedly naïve and innocent, which Jeremy found preferable to a woman who had too much worldly knowledge. Those women tended to lie, seduce, and entrap to suit their own ends. Tabitha could never be like that.

“Did Lady Browning have a successful Season, Your Grace? She was rather excited to experience all London had to offer.”

The duke smiled. “My daughter was more successful than she realised.”

Jeremy’s heart began to thud. Something about the duke’s words sat ill with him. However, he needed to know more.

“Indeed? That is wonderful, Your Grace. Could that be the reason behind your early return?”

“Your powers of deduction never fail to amaze me, Jeremy. You are certainly right about that. Why remain in London when my daughter is set to marry a well-respected and wealthy man?”

Jeremy's heart twisted painfully, setting off a chain of unwanted reactions in his body.

"Marriage?" he asked weakly.

How could Tabitha be betrothed? Jeremy rubbed his cheeks, his face suddenly feeling too tight. A tingling sensation had set in his limbs while a dull headache made itself known at his temples.

"Yes," the duke affirmed. "To Lord Bazeley, to be precise. He is a well-known marquess with many connections that will prove beneficial to me. I couldn't have chosen a better man for my daughter.

His tongue felt swollen and dry, but Jeremy managed to ask the question that burned in his mind.

"When is the wedding to take place, Your Grace?"

"Soon after August."

The answer was a hard punch to Jeremy's gut. "So soon?"

"The sooner, the better," the duke stated. "Lord Bazeley is taken with Tabitha and does not wish to wait too long."

Jeremy knew his heart had to be somewhere on the ground, ready to

be trampled on by his horse. It was already so battered by the duke's words that Jeremy doubted he would feel death if it came to claim him. Numbness overtook him, but Jeremy welcomed it. It was better to feel nothing than have the duke witness his pain. What would he say if the duke questioned his reaction? Could Jeremy admit to loving Tabitha and put in his own offer for her hand in marriage? Certainly not! The idea was entirely amusing and pathetic.

Yes, so humorous that I could gladly ride my horse to a jutting cliff and fall to my doom.

"Then congratulations are in order, Your Grace," Jeremy said, forcing cheer into his voice. "I had no idea such a wonderful thing had taken place. Why have you not announced it yet?"

"I hoped to have Lord Bazeley here when I did it," the duke confessed. "I spoke with him in London before I left, and he promised to come to Storping Manor and formally ask Tabitha to marry him. I know she'll say yes as she was just as taken with him when she first met him. They danced the first dance at the opening ball, and everyone admired their suitability. Perhaps 'tis their fair colouring or their matching beauty. Tabitha will not object to such a great match."

Jeremy kept quiet. What else could he possibly say in response to such troubling news? He had already congratulated the duke. He had nothing else to give.

"Would you excuse me, Your Grace? I must continue my rounds of the estate before the afternoon is spent. I still have much to do."

"Of course, Jeremy," the man exclaimed. "Do what you must. I would like you to ensure that everything is running perfectly when Lord

Bazeley comes. We must put on a good show for my future son-in-law."

Jeremy wanted to say that he would rather burn everything down to the ground than cater to the man who would take Tabitha away, but that was a nonsensical notion. What had he expected? Tabitha was a duke's daughter, a woman far above his station. What else could his love for her have brought him other than pain and regret? It was his own foolish fault to entertain such tender feelings for her in the first place.

After exchanging a few more words that Jeremy couldn't recall mere seconds later, he left the duke, going in the opposite direction. He wanted to get as far away from everyone as he could.

"What did your secret love get you?" Jeremy bitterly asked himself. "Why did I burn a candle for her in my heart when I knew it would be extinguished the day some better man took her from me?"

Not that she had been his to begin with.

Sighing, Jeremy put a hand through his dark curls, cupping the back of his neck for a moment before releasing it with a neck roll. Unable to resist looking back, Jeremy sought Tabitha's form on the swing, finding her in the same position. She certainly didn't look like a woman who was happily engaged. If anything, Tabitha appeared forlorn and concerned about something. Was it her pending marriage to the marquess?

"That doesn't tie in with what Storping said," he decided aloud. "He seems to think that his daughter is happy about the match, although he did suggest that Tabitha wasn't aware of a formal engagement."

Perhaps Tabitha was eagerly awaiting the announcement and was disappointed that nothing had been said since their return. Thinking about Tabitha being happy with another man left Jeremy with a bitter taste in his mouth.

The unfortunate thing about feelings was their disregard for rank. Tabitha was a noble, and Jeremy was not. Though respected, he still could never meet the requirements to marry such a well-bred and beautiful woman. It would have been best if he had set his eyes on a simple woman who would welcome a humble steward as her husband. Jeremy knew there were plenty of such women; he needn't look far.

He only had to attend Sunday service at church, ride into town, or take a look around the estate to notice the admiring gazes of the women. Jeremy had been told he was a handsome man with much to offer, but it wasn't enough to offer for the hand of a duke's daughter. For the first time in his twenty-five years, Jeremy despised his low rank. If not for it, he might have been the one engaged to Tabitha. He knew her better than anyone else, and he likely cared for her more than anyone else ever could.

"I would treat her like the most precious creation known to man, a woman deserving of her husband's praise, love, and attention," he said, turning his horse away. "She would never doubt my love for her. Never."

And that look of misery on her face would never have the opportunity to plague her again, not in his tender care. But who was he to even consider all these things? It was not his business to be mindful of Tabitha's moods, no matter how they tugged and tore at his heart. She simply wasn't meant for him.

Forced resignation pushed Jeremy to complete his list of duties for the day, but he was mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted by the end of it. Who knew loving someone could drain one's life to this extent? It was better to be unfeeling and give attention to matters of duty instead. Duty could never hurt or disappoint; it could only be fulfilled.

Chapter 3

Shaking off a horrible feeling that refused to budge from the pit of her stomach was challenging. Tabitha had spent the greater part of her day telling herself that the unsettling feeling was all in her mind and not evidence of pending doom.

"You're still in a pensive mood," Mandee complained. "I've done all I can to draw you out of it, but you persist with it. Why? What could possibly go wrong today? It's nearly time for dinner, Tabitha. The day is spent."

"Do you not think I know that? 'Tis not a matter of wishing to feel as though the world is about to end."

Tabitha plonked herself on a stool in front of her mirror, grabbing her hairbrush and roughly putting it through her hair.

"You'll have no hair left if you do it like that," Mandee said gently, prying the brush out of Tabitha's hand. "Let me do it. It would be a shame to lose such beautiful locks. It's an ongoing struggle to grow my sparse lot past my shoulders."

Tabitha remained silent, enjoying the soft strokes of the brush through her hair. Mandee had a magic touch, but although the bristles of the hairbrush felt wonderful against her scalp, Tabitha's thoughts remained tumultuous.

What is the matter with me? I'm not usually so morose or concerned over

anything. Even if I had a problem, I still wouldn't feel as forlorn as I do now. Why do I sense a great change? And one I will not like? It makes no sense.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Tabitha smiled. "Is that all they're worth?"

"I would give you a pound if I had it, but I spent my earnings on a length of material. I have a dress pattern in mind, one I saw a high-society woman wear when she walked past the house. The one in London, I mean, not this one. You wouldn't find a genteel lady walking the woods alone and on someone else's property, too. But in London, I saw heaps of women promenading all over the place. I gather it has to do with being noticed. You have never needed to do that."

"No, I haven't. I suppose desperation to have a gentleman see you motivates them to walk about," Tabitha replied. "However, I do not think it true of every woman. Some must simply want the exercise. It's becoming when a woman has flushed skin and slightly tousled hair as though little wind faeries had wished to loosen the tresses from their confining hairstyle."

"There is that, too," Mandee agreed. "But I think my former opinion best fits the majority. How would you like your hair arranged? It's nigh dinner time, and tardiness is not an option. Your mother would think 'tis my inability to get you ready on time."

"You know that's not true. Mama would know I delayed you. What sort of dress do you wish to make?" Tabitha asked, recalling Mandee had mentioned the topic. "You should show me the material and

pattern."

Mandee was a talented seamstress and often worked on different dress creations during her free time. Tabitha found each dress beautiful but didn't feel she was mature enough to wear them just yet. The duchess dressed her in pastel colours that suited Tabitha's delicate youthfulness, whereas the colours Mandee used were rich and vibrant, with some necklines plunging a little too deep for comfort.

Mandee snorted. "So you can buy it from me? I think not. You have bought almost every dress I have ever made, but you refuse to wear them. This one I will make and wear myself. 'Tis no use making a dress that will sit in the wardrobe and never see the light of day."

"You always make them with my measurements in mind," Tabitha argued. "'Tis only natural to buy a dress that is made for you."

Mandee pulled her mouth to the side, her lips pursed as though thinking of something to say. When she raised the brush as though it were an exclamation mark, Tabitha knew she had come up with a counterargument.

"We're similar in size," the woman began. "Therefore 'tis normal to have those dresses made to fit either one of us. Furthermore, I'm making it in my favourite colour."

Tabitha pulled her face. "That awful green-yellow colour? It resembles more a bodily excretion than a colour worthy of a garment."

"I happen to like puce-coloured dresses," Mandee insisted a little

uncertainly.

Tabitha raised her eyebrows but said nothing. The maid narrowed her eyes at her in the mirror before quickly styling Tabitha's hair in a simple updo.

"That should do for dinner," the woman declared, stepping back to admire her handiwork. "It would look better if you turned that frown upside down. I thought I could occupy your mind for a little while, but your countenance doesn't appear much improved. I must be losing my touch."

Mandee was right. Not even the mystery of her friend's new pattern and purchased material was enough to change the tide of her thoughts.

Tabitha sighed. "I'm sorry, Mandee. I'm afraid I'm not good company today. I'll be glad to see this day through and wake up feeling better tomorrow."

"But what if this sense of doom persists?" Mandee asked.

"It won't," Tabitha promised. "I'm sure of it. Whatever is meant to happen will take place today. If the day passes, then I've undoubtedly escaped it."

Mandee's brow furrowed, but she made no further comment. Tabitha could understand her concern; she was just as worried about the feeling. The last time she had felt like this was when her grandmother died. That was five years ago, and she had never experienced such a

horrible feeling since. Plenty of unwelcome events had happened since then, such as her pet parrot flying away, or her terrier dying of old age, or even Mrs Hunter, their housekeeper of fifteen years, retiring. These had all made Tabitha cry bitter tears.

“Well, let’s hope you are right and the moment passes you like the Israelites walking through the Red Sea,” said Mandee.

“Nothing as dramatic as that,” Tabitha said with a little chuckle. “Would you get me the green dress with the rosettes stitched along the neckline? That seems to be a good choice for dinner this evening.”

It was also her ‘good luck dress’. Tabitha usually wore it on days when she needed a situation to go her way. What better day than one where she felt she was on the brink of chaos?

Dinner was a quiet but tense affair. Tabitha felt the air was pregnant with bad news about to drop into her lap and burn a hole through her dress. Her parents were acting strangely, neither of them saying much, but whenever their eyes met, a look would pass between them.

It took all Tabitha’s self-discipline not to blurt out a command forcing them to tell her what on earth was going on. Instead, she quietly slurped on her chestnut soup, casting furtive glances at the duke and duchess. Tabitha didn’t want them to know that she knew something was amiss, which was rather contradictory when she really wanted to know what was afoot.

The soup bowls were taken away, and the table was laid with roasted meat, vegetables drowned in butter sauce, and savoury pie. Tabitha's father carved the roast mutton leg, placing slivers of it on each plate as was customary for the patriarch. She helped herself to potatoes and carrots, asking her father if he wanted the same.

He declined in favour of the pie and meat, smothering both in thick gravy. He still believed that vegetables were not all too healthy for one's digestion, but the notion was dying away as more people realised the benefits of consuming them.

Tabitha particularly loved artichokes, green beans, and cucumbers, which, oddly enough, were all green. Was she obsessed with the colour? She gave a minute shrug of her shoulders as she cut a piece of mutton and swirled it in gravy.

"I haven't seen much of you today, dear," her mother said. "What did you do?"

Now they chose to speak to her? Tabitha was tempted to give vague answers, but her good nature prevented it.

"The weather was so lovely that I spent most of my day outside. I do not wish to enter into autumn, regretting that I did not take full advantage of summer."

Her mother nodded, smiling. "That makes sense, dear. Just do not spend too much time in the sun as you burn easily. Do you recall the last time you did not heed my words?"

Tabitha did. It was three years ago and by the lake that ran at the bottom of the estate. She had been adamant that she could catch fish for their dinner and spent the whole day without a bonnet or parasol. By the time Tabitha returned to the house, her face had turned pink, faint freckles had appeared, and her hands were blistered. It was the first and last time she ever did that.

“I’m not so foolish to attempt it again,” she assured her mother. “Once was enough.”

“Indeed,” her father added. “I would hate you to be married while sporting peeling skin and unsightly freckles.”

Tabitha laughed. “You speak as though I shall be married soon.”

Her parents looked at each other, their expressions similar. A sinking sensation settled within the very marrow of Tabitha’s bones. She didn’t like this one bit. Perhaps if she ignored them or ‘it’, she wouldn’t have to put up with anything.

“This roast mutton is delicious,” she commented, stuffing a sizeable piece into her small mouth. “Delicious.”

“Do not speak with your mouth full, dear,” her mother admonished. “It’s unbecoming.”

Tabitha swallowed hard, chasing the lump with sweet wine. “My apologies, Mama, but Cook has outdone herself this evening.”

“It’s no different from any other roast leg of mutton she has made,” her father argued. “I, for one, prefer roast leg of lamb. It’s more tender and doesn’t have the strong scent of sheep.”

“’Tis only because you had a bad experience as a child,” Tabitha answered. “You would otherwise love it as much as I do.”

“I think you’re both wrong,” the duchess countered. “Roast duck is far superior. I do not mind it fried in thyme butter, either. Perhaps we should have duck for dinner tomorrow. I’ll speak to Mrs Baggins about it when we discuss the meal plan.”

Mrs Baggins was their new housekeeper. She was a kind soul, but Tabitha still hankered after Mrs Hunter.

Pleased that her parents were now behaving like their usual selves, Tabitha added a little more gravy to her plate and took a slice of meat pie. Dinner continued without the strain of before, and Tabitha found herself discussing her plans for the approaching autumn and Michaelmas.

“Do you suppose we could throw a party this year?” she asked. “I do not think anyone in Surrey has done so.”

“I suppose Michaelmas is as good as any reason to throw a party, dear,” her mother agreed. “Provided that you spend the autumn here.”

Tabitha wrinkled her nose. “What an odd thing to say, Mama. Of course, I’ll be here. Where else would I be?”

The duchess smiled, turning to her husband. “Should we not tell her now, Alfred? I think we’ve kept her in the dark long enough.”

“Kept me in the dark about what?” Tabitha asked.

The pair ignored her and continued to discuss whatever was on their minds among themselves.

“Lord Bazeley wished to be the first to announce it to her,” Tabitha’s father argued.

Leo?! What on earth did he have to do with any of this? Why did the marquess wish to announce anything to her?

“I know, but I’m so excited I can hardly stand it,” her mother exclaimed. “Tabitha is wonderful at facial expressions. She can pretend to be surprised when Lord Bazeley asks her.”

At that point, Tabitha felt she had had enough. “Oh, for the love of all things holy and good, would either of you care to tell me precisely what is going on? Why is Lord Bazeley part of this conversation?”

Her parents finally looked at her. The duke appeared surprised, while the duchess grinned as though all her wishes had come true.

“May I tell her, Alfred?” Tabitha’s mother pressed.

The duke nodded. “Go ahead, my dove. I do not think there is any harm in sharing such good news. I’m certain Lord Bazeley will understand.”

Tabitha watched her mother take a deep breath, releasing it with an excited clap of her hands.

“My dear Tabby, I’m so pleased to reveal your good fortune. Your father spoke to me of this match not too long ago, and I must say that I approve. A marriage between our daughter and Lord Bazeley is certainly something to rejoice about. I think we should throw a party. Don’t you agree, Alfred?”

Tabitha stared at her parents in shock. How could her mother drop such a ferocious spitting viper onto her lap and pretend it was normal?

“I can’t marry him!” Tabitha exclaimed, wondering if her parents had taken leave of their senses. “How could you say such a thing?”

Didn’t they know anything about the marquess’s reputation? Mandee had told her so much that Tabitha wished she had never begged to know everything about Leo’s sordid activities.

“What do you mean, dear?” her mother asked, slightly puzzled. “Oh, I see!”

What? What did she see? A young woman on the brink of insanity? Tabitha would definitely lose her mind if she were forced to marry the scoundrel.

“You’re simply shy and overwhelmed by such great news, aren’t you?” her mother claimed.

“No!” Tabitha denied. “That’s not it at all!”

“Of course, it is, Tabitha,” her father insisted. “We are older and wiser than you are. You might not understand yourself, but rest assured that we do.”

Had her parents lost their senses? What part of she could not marry him did they not understand?

“You’ll soon overcome your shyness, dear,” her mother promised. “Securing such a match deserves many dresses in every style and colour you desire. We’ll have to start on your trousseau as well, or we’ll never be done by August.”

August? Did her parents mean to marry her so soon? “This must be a dream,” Tabitha said more to herself.

The duchess chuckled. “It’s no dream, Tabby. You will soon become Lady Bazeley. You’ll be a marchioness, dear! That’s even higher than a countess. Of course, I would have preferred you to marry a duke as I did, but there aren’t many eligible dukes left. Most are either married or destitute.”

Tabitha wished that Lord Bazeley was destitute, so she didn't have to marry him. Perhaps she might get somewhere with her parents if she reasoned with them.

"Is this not happening too fast?" she asked. "I only met the marquess once."

"Once was enough, Tabitha," her father asserted. "Lord Bazeley is a wonderful man who will make the perfect son-in-law."

Son-in-law? This wasn't about her father, for heaven's sake! This was about her marrying a ruthless criminal.

"What about the perfect husband? What if Lord Bazeley is not all he appears to be?"

Tabitha didn't want to accuse the man without any proof, but she would speak of the things she had heard if necessary.

I'll simply keep Mandee's involvement out of it. I do not wish her to be in trouble for telling me the truth about that despicable man.

"You ask silly questions, dear," her mother said, waving her hand dismissively. "Lord Bazeley is known by many people. He is who he says he is."

Why were her parents ignoring her concerns? “What if I do not wish to marry him?”

Tabitha’s parents ignored her and spoke to each other about the plans for the wedding. No longer able to handle their dismissive attitude, Tabitha burst into tears.

She wasn’t used to her parents not listening to her or pandering to her wants and needs. This was entirely foreign to her, and it was all Lord Bazeley’s fault. Why had that man ever come into their lives?

Tabitha’s tears finally drew her parents’ attention, but it didn’t really do her any good.

“Why are you crying, Tabitha?” her mother asked. “This is a joyous occasion!”

“No!” Tabitha argued. “I do not want to marry Lord Bazeley. He’s merely a rake and a scoundrel of the highest degree. Why do you keep pushing this match?”

She hiccuped, feeling her misery drape over her shoulders like a dark shroud. Tabitha knew that she could never be happy again if her parents forced her to marry Leo.

I’ll likely die at his hands! I know I will not survive a week in his company.

Who knew what unsavoury things the man might do in her presence?

"Why must you fight us on this?" her father asked gently. "'Tis your duty as a daughter to make a good match. Lord Bazeley is an excellent fellow and will make a worthy husband. You must give him a chance."

Tabitha shook her head. "You do not know what you are saying! Why him? Why must I marry Lord Bazeley? He has not even courted me to see if we will indeed suit."

The duke dipped his head, a look of helplessness overtaking his face. "We need his help, dear."

"Why?" Tabitha cried. "Since when do we need anyone's help?"

Her father lifted his head, his eyes staring at her imploringly. Tabitha steeled herself against any tender feelings, knowing they would be used against her. Seeing that she wasn't giving an inch, the duke's face turned resolute and stony.

"I did not wish to tell you this, Tabitha, but our estate has been mismanaged, and we are in terrible need of funds if we are to maintain our current lifestyle."

They were in financial trouble? That didn't seem possible. Mr Gibbs was meticulous with everything and often received her father's praise.

"I do not believe you."

“It’s not a matter of belief,” her father argued. “But facts. We are in dire financial straits and need this marriage to pull us out of the bog. It’s as simple as that.”

“Even if that is all true, I have only attended one ball. Surely, I should be allowed to attend others if I am to have a chance of meeting the right suitor? One who I like and will provide us with the means to help our estate. Why not return to London and find someone I will not protest to calling my husband? Someone I could possibly love given a fair chance.”

Both her parents looked at each other, their eyes speaking volumes. Even Tabitha could tell there was no way out before her mother even spoke.

“We cannot afford another ball or outing, dear,” the duchess said quietly. “We hoped the one ball would be enough time to find someone. Your father and I knew of Lord Bazeley’s eligibility, and we prayed he would notice you. Our prayers were answered. Lord Bazeley is besotted with you and will marry you once the Season is over. This decision is not up for discussion.”

Nothing Tabitha said was going to change their minds. She pushed her plate away and stood up.

“Well, I suppose there is nothing left to say. Money appears to be more important than the happiness of your own daughter.”

With that said, she walked away, tears silently trickling down her

cheeks. Her parents had just damned her, and they didn't even know it.

Chapter 4

Chin in hand, Tabitha shook her head at her handmaiden's request that she join her parents for breakfast the next day.

"Why?" she asked. "I doubt it matters whether I eat or not. They only care about the money they will have after selling me to that devil."

Mandee closed her eyes briefly, rubbing her temples. "This is not the way to deal with challenges, Tabitha. Going hungry will only hurt you."

"Who said I would go hungry? I fully intend to eat."

"Then you will ignore your parents?"

"That's precisely what I want to do," Tabitha affirmed. "They ignored my every concern last evening and stated in no uncertain terms that my opinions did not matter because they knew better. Mama and Papa are more concerned about keeping a high way of living than investigating my claims. Any good parent would look into the matter to find out if it were true or not."

Tabitha had gone to bed last night with swollen eyes and a blocked nose due to her endless crying. Not once did her mother come to see how she fared. The duchess likely imagined all the dresses she would have made for Tabitha and perhaps some for herself as the woman did love splurging on her wardrobe.

“Perhaps they do not understand what you told them about the marquess,” Mandee offered.

Tabitha tilted her head to the side, regarding her friend. “Did you not hear a word I said? They refused to believe it! They understood everything I told them; believe me. The lure of money was simply too great.”

Tabitha loved having plenty as much as the next person, but she never thought it would come at her expense one day. The weight of the financial burden her parents had placed on her shoulders was too much to bear. Marry a monster like Leo?

Leaving her bed, Tabitha stomped to her writing desk with the idea of penning a runaway note. That would teach them! Tabitha had fantasised about running away and, along the way, falling into the arms of the man she was supposed to be with.

Didn’t that tend to happen in love stories? The heroine would always be the victim of some terrible circumstance, and the hero would appear in the nick of time to help her. Tabitha doubted any story had the heroine’s own parents as the villains.

“You wish to write a letter right now?” Mandee asked with a touch of exasperation in her voice. “Why? Your parents have requested your presence in the breakfast room, Tabitha. You cannot ignore that. Leave that letter and come with me.”

Tabitha shot the woman a stubborn look, throwing her a devil-may-care expression before sitting in front of a blank sheet of paper and

dipping her quill in the inkwell.

“Dear Mama and Papa,” she began, quickly scratching out the words. “No, they are no longer dear to me. I shall refer to them as the Duke and Duchess of Storping.”

“Why are you writing a letter to your parents?” Mandee enquired, looking over Tabitha’s shoulder.

Tabitha had no intention of hiding the note from the woman because she needed Mandee to deliver it at the right moment.

“I am running away,” Tabitha declared. “I can no longer stand to live under the same roof as my parents and will not suffer their presence or plans for my life. I have ceased to be their darling daughter; I am now merely an object to be sold in exchange for money.”

“Oh, Tabitha,” said Mandee, sighing. “You cannot be serious.”

“No? Fetch me my lightest trunk, or better yet, a large sheet and place a few necessary items inside. I’ll need a change of clothing for a day or two, some food, reading material, perhaps something to read along the way–”

“Have you lost your mind?” the maid demanded. “Do you think you are visiting a friend? Running away is not something to take lightly. How will you fend for yourself? There are many dangers outside this estate, especially for a woman as pretty and vulnerable as you.”

“Then tell me how you can leave this estate on your own when you wish to go to the market square? You have never mentioned any dangers. I think you’re trying to scare me, aren’t you?”

“Yes!” Mandee admitted. “But what I speak is the truth. I am a servant, Tabitha, which comes with some unspoken protection among others of the same kind. However, you are a duke’s daughter and a high target for any bandits looking for mischief. Not just bandits, but men who would think nothing about taking advantage of a high-bred woman.”

Tabitha hated to admit it, but Mandee had sown a seed of doubt in her mind. What if running away wasn’t the adventure she had imagined it to be? What if something happened to her?

I do not know which is the lesser evil. Taking my chances with the outside world or succumbing to my parents’ wishes of marriage. They both seem equally terrible.

To her horror, Tabitha felt her lower lip tremble. She was trapped, wasn’t she? There was no way out of this situation.

“I wish I were a servant like you, Mandee,” she eventually said. “No one makes you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“But a life of a servant is precisely that,” the woman argued. “We’re always doing something someone else wants or needs for most of our lives. Saying no is not an option.”

“But no one forces you to marry.”

“In some cases, no, but do not assume we have equal rights as someone of your class has. You have lived a life of luxury and freedom, Tabitha. That’s all you’re accustomed to. For the first time in your life, you have been forced to consider the cruelties of reality. I agree that being forced to marry Lord Bazeley is an injustice, but what can you do? Unless you convince your parents otherwise, this marriage will take place.”

Tabitha knew Mandee was right, but that didn’t mean she had to accept the truth just yet.

“There is always a chance something might happen,” Tabitha insisted. “Lord Bazeley could decide to cancel the engagement, a wealthier hero might appear to save me, or perhaps I’ll sprout wings and leave my home forever.”

All those suggestions sounded as impossible as the last. Tabitha probably had more chance of growing wings than having Leo cancel the wedding or having a wealthy suitor call on her parents for her hand. Tabitha didn’t even know any other suitors! Her parents never gave her the opportunity to meet anyone else. This entire predicament felt planned.

“Will you come down to breakfast?” Mandee questioned. “Ignore your parents if you wish, but at least do so at the breakfast table. Let them see your face.”

Tabitha didn’t feel like doing anything of the sort. That would just make her parents believe that everything was fine. Well, it wasn’t.

“Make up any story you wish to tell them,” said Tabitha. “But I am not going to sit at a meal with them. Not ever again if I can help it. I shall take myself to the kitchen and get something to eat there.”

Mandee looked heavenward for a moment, her lips moving but no sound coming out. Tabitha figured her friend had reached the end of her tether, but so had she.

“Fine. Very well,” Mandee agreed, sighing. “I shall tell them that you are not hungry right now, but I shall take you something to eat a little later.”

“That is as good an excuse as any. I’ll walk down with you, but we’ll part ways before the breakfast room,” Tabitha asserted. “At this point, I feel I have more in common with the servants than my own parents.” Tabitha left her seat, heading to the door and opening it. “Come along.”

“I suggest you remain out of sight until well after breakfast,” Mandee suggested, walking towards her. “It will not do for your parents to see you coming from the kitchens when you claimed you were not hungry.”

Tabitha rolled her eyes. “I’m not all that daft, you know.”

The pair took to the stairs, separating at the foot of them. It felt odd to be the one heading to the kitchens while Mandee went to her parents. It was usually the other way around. It didn’t bother Tabitha, but it certainly was amusing.

The kitchen staff were surprised to see her and immediately started faffing around her.

“Do calm down,” Tabitha ordered. “I only wish to have something simple to eat. Some toast and jam with tea will suffice.”

“But, My Lady!” a servant protested. “A sumptuous breakfast has been prepared and served in the breakfast room. Would you not rather go there?”

The girl looked at Tabitha as though she had grown a second head and was about to attack with it.

“Is there anything wrong with being in the kitchen for my breakfast?” Tabitha asked. “It’s where all the food comes from, is it not? It stands to reason that I would like to come to the source. Do not ask me any more questions, Mary. Simply do as I asked, please.”

The maid’s cheeks deepened in colour as she nodded. “Yes, My Lady. Which jam would you like?”

“Blackberry and Marmalade.”

Tabitha always ate two flavours, although on different slices of bread. The marmalade was best eaten with the eggs and meat part of the breakfast, and the blackberry ended off the meal with some sweet and milky tea.

She was quickly served her meal, and everyone tried to act normal as they went about their chores, but Tabitha could almost see the questions in their minds. What would they say to her marrying the marquess? Likely horrified. Mandee had heard the gossip from the servants; thus, they had to know how terrible Leo was.

As Tabitha munched on her toast and sipped her tea, she slowly realised that this wasn't just a matter of three people ruining her life, but four. She wouldn't be in this position if Mr Gibbs had not mismanaged the estate! Tabitha couldn't understand how he could have made such a mess of the finances.

Her father never missed an opportunity to praise the steward and boast how competent the man was. Mr Gibbs had worked for them for seven years, and not once had Tabitha ever heard of any trouble. What had suddenly happened?

"Well, it doesn't matter now, does it?" she muttered aloud.

"Sorry, My Lady?" asked Mary.

"If someone ruined your life, what would you do?" she asked the woman.

"I suppose I would confront the person if possible."

Tabitha nodded. "That's what I thought. Where about on the property does Mr Gibbs stay, Mary?"

Tabitha now knew that nothing could change her situation, but that didn't mean she couldn't raise hell on the way to the altar. Perhaps if she behaved horribly, Lord Bazeley would think twice about marrying her. It was worth a try.

"On the west, My Lady. Past the hydrangeas and beyond a little thicket of trees."

Tabitha nodded, standing up. "Thank you for breakfast. I'll likely return for my next meal."

She didn't intend to spend any meals with her parents. Leaving through the kitchen back door, Tabitha felt her mood grow darker until it was positively foul with angry thoughts of all the things she would tell the steward once she saw him. How dare he ruin her life like this? Why hadn't he done his job correctly?

Tabitha paused, looking on either side of her. When Mary had said west, did she mean west in general or her west?

"I suppose you can't have a personal west," she thought aloud. "That might work with the left hand and right hand, but west is west."

She chose her direction, marching on to find the hydrangeas the maid had mentioned. Tabitha had never had to look for the steward before and didn't have an inkling to where on the estate he could be. Although Mary had given directions, they were still rather vague. Hydrangea bushes were dotted about the estate, and there was more than one thicket of trees.

Tabitha also knew there were several houses on the estate, but Mr Gibbs' house would be the biggest after Storping Manor. The steward was, after all, second-in-command after her father and ran everything on the estate. Nothing escaped the man.

Tabitha came to a bush of hydrangeas but didn't see the thicket of trees. Had she taken a wrong turn? This was just another thing that added to her growing frustration against the steward. Retracing her steps, Tabitha went back and tried a different direction.

That decision proved futile as well. Throwing her hands into the air, she began to verbally rain all sorts of curses upon everyone who she believed had come together to make her life a living misery. The butler found her moments later and approached her warily.

"May I ask what it is you're looking for, My Lady? I'll get it for you or have someone do it."

"I'm glad to see you, Baxter. Would you mind telling me where Mr Gibbs' office is?"

The man's expression changed to one of surprise. "Mr Gibbs?"

"Yes, Baxter," Tabitha said impatiently. "Where is his office? I know he no longer has it in the main house."

"I'll pass whatever message you have for him, My Lady. You do not

have to find him."

"But I want to find him," Tabitha insisted. "I want him to hear everything I have to say."

Her words were so vehemently spoken that they raised the butler's eyebrows by a fraction.

"Very well, My Lady. Please, come this way."

Baxter took her along a path Tabitha had not tried yet, but she convinced herself that it was the one she would have taken next. Sure enough, the bush of hydrangeas appeared, followed by the thicket of trees. Had this direction been a snake, Tabitha would have indeed been bitten.

The butler knocked on the door for her, but Tabitha was past politeness. She tried the doorknob and found it open. Pushing the door wide open, she went through the rooms, calling out for the steward. Baxter followed behind her, undoubtedly horrified by Tabitha's behaviour. Well, she didn't care one iota.

"Mr Gibbs!" Tabitha bellowed, throwing open a door.

It was the right one this time. The steward actually jumped in his seat, dropping his quill back into the inkwell.

"Lady Browning!" the man exclaimed, standing up. "To what do I owe

this pleasure?"

Tabitha gave a very unladylike snort. "Pleasure? This is more of a nightmare, Mr Gibbs, and you are the reason behind my misery."

"Excuse me?" the man asked. "What do you mean? I do not understand."

"Oh, no, no, no. I am the one who does not understand. You are the one who should answer to what you have done. I doubt you can!"

Tabitha watched the steward slowly sink into his chair, a look of pure confusion on his face. Did he have absolutely no remorse for what he had done?

"How can you just sit there and pretend not to know?" Tabitha cried. "How?"

Tabitha felt she was losing her grip on what little control she had over her emotions. She didn't know if she would cry or lunge across the table and throw something at the steward's head. Terrible desperation had her in a headlock, forcing her to forget her manners.

"I have never knowingly done anything to hurt you, My Lady," said Mr Gibbs, his expression pained. "If you would just explain what I have done, I shall surely apologise for it."

Tabitha laughed, vaguely aware that it sounded manic. "What can an

apology do for me? My fate has already been sealed, and it's all your fault. Why have you ruined my life? What did I ever do to you to deserve this?"

"My Lady!" cried Mr Gibbs, sounding helpless. "Please, I do not understand. What have I done?"

"What have you done?" said Tabitha, her voice rising. "What have you done? Your mismanagement is the reason for my ruin!"

Tabitha started when she felt a gentle hand pull on hers. She yanked herself away, turning to face the person who would dare interrupt her. Finding Mandee, Tabitha felt herself crumbling.

"He is the one to blame," Tabitha told her. "But he refuses to acknowledge it."

"Why don't you come with me?" Mandee suggested, taking her hand once more. "We can talk about it away from everyone. I think we're attracting too much attention."

Tabitha looked around the room, finding Baxter and Mr Gibbs staring at her with a mixture of concern and wariness. Tabitha made out two or three other people outside the window, trying to pretend they were not keenly interested in what was happening in the office. Perhaps her outburst had been ill-timed. Tabitha nodded at Mandee, following the woman out of the room.

They took the servants' stairs back to her bedroom once they reached the house, where Tabitha immediately flung herself on her bed.

“It’s not fair!” she said miserably. “I am the one who looks the fool, yet I am the victim. How dare Mr Gibbs do this to me?”

Mandee sat beside her, smoothing Tabitha’s hair. “That is not true at all. Jeremy could have never made a mistake with the estate’s accounts. He is too thorough and meticulous.”

“Jeremy? I see you’re on friendly terms with him,” Tabitha accused. “Of course, you would defend him.”

“Just because I call him by his first name does not mean that I will defend him if he does something wrong.”

“No? Then, pray, tell, what are you doing right now?”

Shaking her head, Tabitha turned her back on her friend, facing the wall. It seemed like everyone was on the side of wrong, and she was the only one fighting for justice. It wasn’t fair.

“Goodness!” Mandee exclaimed. “Would you listen to your whining?”

Tabitha immediately sat up, glaring at the woman. “Whining? I’m whining? How dare you say that!”

“Oh, I certainly dare,” said Mandee, standing and planting hands on

her waist. “Jeremy has not done anything to you. That man works hard to ensure you and your parents live a wonderful life of luxury. Look at all the things you have,” the woman said, turning around. “How many women can boast about such things?”

Tabitha watched her handmaiden walk over to her armoire, throwing the doors open and running her hands along her gowns.

“How else have you been able to buy these things? You have three large velvet-lined cases of exquisite jewellery, more than twenty pairs of shoes, beautiful and ridiculous bonnets, stylish carriages – need I go on?”

Tabitha crossed her legs and arms. “What is your point?”

“The point is that you would have never had these things if not for Jeremy. I know how hard he works to make money, not lose it! I guarantee that the money lost was spent on something else and is not due to a mismanagement of funds. I’m willing to stake my life on that.”

Deep down, Tabitha had always known that Mr Gibbs could never do such a thing, but it had been easier to blame him. She hung her head and covered her eyes, hiding her tears. What a fool she had been! He had always been so kind to her, and she even used to call him Jeremy. What had changed?

“There, there,” said Mandee, rubbing her back. “We all make mistakes. I’ll speak to Jeremy and explain everything. I know he won’t be angry. He is far too good to hold grudges.”

Tabitha shook her head. “No, I’ll do it. He deserves an apology from me.”

She knew the steward would come to the main house to speak with her father before the day was through. Tabitha decided she would wait for him and apologise as soon as she had the opportunity. She wanted to be on good terms with everyone once she was forced to leave her home. Tabitha shuddered just thinking about that day. It would be the end for her; she just knew it.

Chapter 5

Tabitha waited patiently in the Great Hall. Hardly anyone came this way unless a party was underfoot. Other than that, it was left alone until cleaning, which had already taken place earlier that day. No one would disturb her here.

Peeking around the door, Tabitha kept an eye on the direction Jeremy would appear. He was currently in the study with the duke, undoubtedly discussing estate matters. Now that she had time to think about it, it struck Tabitha as odd that her father would indirectly blame Jeremy for their loss of wealth. The duke hadn't said it outright, but who else managed the estate besides the steward?

Everything had been committed into his hands because Tabitha's father couldn't be bothered with the work side of things. He was merely pleased to receive the money when it suited him. Nobles rarely were involved in running their own estates, yet they felt capable of running the country. How was that possible?

Shaking her head, Tabitha gently closed the door. Jeremy would be at least another ten minutes. His movements could be depended upon to follow the same pattern every day. At exactly quarter past four, Jeremy would leave the duke's study and make his way downstairs.

He might speak to a servant or two, usually Baxter or the housekeeper. Then, he would take dinner at five o'clock in his own house. Tabitha knew this because she would see Mary leave the main house with a covered tray. However, Tabitha stood station at the door at five minutes to his usual appearance time to be on the safe side.

Jeremy appeared some moments later, his strides long and purposeful as he took the stairs. Tabitha pulled her head back for just a second or two, looking at the clock. She smiled. It was quarter past four. She waited for Jeremy to reach the last step before revealing herself.

“Mr Gibbs!” she cried, her voice one decibel higher than a whisper.

Jeremy paused, looking around. Tabitha called out to him again, this time waving her hand. That caught his attention. She watched him look behind, then pointed at his chest. Nodding, Tabitha gestured for him to come inside. She saw the same wariness she had witnessed earlier enter his eyes, but he kept coming towards her.

Tabitha opened the door wider, locking it once he was inside. It was highly irregular to be in the same room with a man that was not a family member, but Tabitha wanted to take her chances. Apologising to Jeremy was the only thing that mattered right now.

Tucking a wisp of pale hair behind her ears, Tabitha lightly gnawed on her bottom lip as she tried to think of a way to begin. She had never been in such a position before.

“You wished to speak to me?” Jeremy asked.

That was obvious, but Tabitha sensed he was giving her a nudge to say what was on her mind. She looked up at him, surprised by how dark his eyes were. Had she ever noticed them before? Surely, she must have. Tabitha had known Jeremy for seven years; how could she not know his eye colour? She gave a mental shake of her head, reminding herself that she was here to apologise and not question the depth of his eyes.

“Thank you for coming in, Mr Gibbs,” she began. “I know that you would prefer not to see my face for a while.”

“I am not angry at you if that is what you think,” he said kindly.

The tenderness in Jeremy’s voice was her undoing. It would have been better if he had been stiff and indifferent towards her. Tabitha turned away as the first salty droplet fell from her left eye. She hastily brushed it away, inwardly groaning when another fell.

“This is not what I expected,” she said plaintively. “I’m supposed to apologise, and here I find myself crying as though I am the victim! You must think me pathetic, Mr Gibbs.”

“Not at all, My Lady. I think you rather brave.”

That surprised her. Tabitha turned around, searching his eyes for sincerity, and found it. How did he not think her pathetic? It denied all reason.

“How can I be brave?” she asked. “A courageous person does not attack the innocent.”

“But you did not know I was innocent. You came to see me because you believed I had meddled in your affairs. Not many women would go to that extent. They would simply accept matters and move on as best they could.”

Tabitha still felt ashamed and awkward, but Jeremy was not adding to it. If anything, he was alleviating the weight of her crushing feelings.

"You make me sound like a rebel," she said with a pained smile.

"Rebels are not the bad people that most make them out to be," Jeremy explained. "They fight for a cause and stand by it unto death. 'Tis the oppressive opinion of the majority that make the rebel appear dangerous to society."

Tabitha found that she agreed with him. "Are you a rebel, Mr Gibbs?"

He smiled. "I have never put a foot out of place, so I suppose not. I must not be courageous as you are."

"I do not believe that. I think you would fight for what you believe in if a worthy cause arose."

Jeremy gave a little shrug. "Perhaps given the opportunity, I would, although I doubt it. If I cannot fight for what I want, how will I fight for a cause?"

His question intrigued Tabitha. Jeremy didn't strike her as a man who would allow an opportunity to pass him by. If he wanted something, then by golly, he would undoubtedly work for it. Why would he say otherwise?

“And what is it that you want?” Tabitha asked.

Jeremy smiled sadly. “Now, that is a secret, My Lady. One that I will likely take to my grave.”

“That is not at all fair, Mr Gibbs. Why admit something, only to keep it hidden away? You have piqued my interest in whatever it is that you cannot fight for but want. Perhaps I can help you.”

“That is most kind of you, but this is a matter no one can solve unless a miracle were to occur.” Jeremy paused when voices were heard outside the door. “Do you think it safe to be in here together? Someone might come in.”

“I have locked the door,” Tabitha explained. “Even if someone were to somehow get in, they still wouldn’t find us together. There is a secret passageway near the mantelpiece that leads to the scullery. Mandee and I found it during one boring afternoon many years ago.”

“I see you have thought of everything, but this is still not proper. Perhaps I should go.”

“No!” Tabitha protested. “Not until I have fully apologised for my words. You have managed to take me off my train of thought, but I shall not rest until I say what I need to.”

“But you needn’t say anything,” Jeremy insisted.

“Yes, I do. Stop arguing with me and take a seat. We’re perfectly safe in here.”

Tabitha did not wait for him but crossed the room to where a few seats were grouped together. The Great Hall was primarily used for dancing, so not many chairs were included in the room.

A pianoforte stood in one corner, and there was even a set of stairs leading up to a space where an orchestra would play. Gold candlesticks were fastened to the walls, while a great crystal chandelier hung above, complete with its own holes to hold candles.

Everything was either in gold, red, or bronze, excluding the white marble busts at each corner of the room. It indeed was a grand room that had held many balls in the past. Only then did Tabitha realise they had not held a ball or dinner party in some time. Was it due to the lack of funds?

“You played the pianoforte during the last ball held here,” Jeremy commented. “I thought you had played beautifully. ’Tis a shame you rarely do so anymore.”

“I do not have occasion to, but I sometimes play something light and soothing for Mama and Papa after dinner. They say it aids in digestion. I do not know how true that is, but I have always taken their word for it.”

Jeremy chuckled softly. “I, too, would lie if it meant that I could hear you play.”

Tabitha's cheeks coloured. "I am not that accomplished. I think you're distracting me again," she accused.

"Perhaps. I simply do not wish you to dwell on a situation that I have no ill feelings towards."

"But it bothers me," Tabitha asserted. "I should have never accused you of ruining my life. 'Tis not your fault that my parents wish to marry me off."

"Marriage is a wonderful blessing when it is done right. I understand that you may not wish to marry, but perhaps you should give it a chance."

"You do not understand, Mr Gibbs, and I do not wish to discuss it. The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth."

Jeremy looked as though he would push the matter further, but he hesitated. Tabitha knew he would never overstep his boundary and believed asking too many questions was prying into her private life.

"If not for Baxter, I might not have found your house," said Tabitha with a bit of a laugh. "Perhaps you should give him a little scolding."

"It will fall like water down a duck's back. Baxter has a mind of his own, you know. I think it comes with the territory of being a butler in this household for over twenty years. He is practically part of the furniture."

“That is true, but I might have scared him earlier today. He has never seen me in such a rage.”

“Nor have I,” Jeremy confessed. “It was a sight to behold. I was not certain if I should take cover or stand and watch. At one point, I was almost confident you would throw something at my head.”

Despite the severity of the topic, Tabitha laughed. “I very nearly did! But I am glad I didn’t. I am truly so sorry, Mr Gibbs. My outburst was uncalled for, and you didn’t deserve it at all.”

She winced as she thought about the way she had thrown his door open and proceeded to nearly take his head off with her unfounded accusations. Tabitha promised herself she would never do that again, not unless she had proof. Even then, she would not lose control but confront the person with a level-head.

Any other person would have thought Tabitha had taken leave of her senses, but Jeremy had been understanding. Perhaps it was a good thing that she had attacked him and not someone less understanding.

“Would you feel better if I told you it was the most interesting part of my day?” Jeremy asked.

“Perhaps, but I should be made to feel like the villain I am. Instead, you have succeeded in soothing me. That’s not fair to you.”

“I will be the judge of what is fair where I am concerned, My Lady.

You needn't worry about it."

Tabitha tilted her head to the side as she regarded the man before her. He was so kind and gracious and undeserving of any suspicion. Jeremy would probably give his life before mismanaging the estate. Something else had to have happened, but what? Tabitha felt she deserved to know what had happened to their wealth since it directly impacted her freedom.

"Do you know what I find unfair?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"My lack of freedom. I had never truly thought about it until I no longer had it. I envy you, Mr Gibbs. You can come and go as you please and marry whoever you wish to. You could probably walk about town in the dead of night and have nothing happen to you. That isn't so for me. I used to believe that I could do anything, not realising that all the luxury in this house is just a gilded cage. Soon, I will go from one cage to the next, but I'm worried my new home will not be as loving."

Jeremy's eyes took on so much pain and distress that Tabitha wondered if she had taken her frankness a step too far. It wasn't right for her to share so much with a servant, but the words had just flowed out of her.

"Forgive me if I have said too much, Mr Gibbs," she begged. "I did not mean to saddle you with my troubles."

“Do not apologise, My Lady. Perhaps I should leave. Mary will wonder where I am when she brings my dinner.”

Tabitha’s cheeks felt hot as she rose to her feet. “Yes, of course. I should not have kept you so long.”

“Think nothing of it, My Lady.”

Easier said than done. Tabitha walked him to the door, unlocking it before peering outside. No one was about.

“You’re clear to go, Mr Gibbs, but before you leave, I wish to express my gratitude for your patience and understanding. You did not have to forgive me, but you did. Thank you.”

“Thank you for thinking me important enough to receive your apology, My Lady,” said Jeremy, bowing before her. “Have a lovely evening.”

Tabitha managed a smile. “I shall try.”

Jeremy slipped through the door, looking this way and that before hurrying away. Tabitha watched his departing form, unable to look elsewhere. The steward was rather handsome, wasn’t he? She admired his strong frame and shapely legs, noticing how fetching he looked in his attire.

In all the years Jeremy had served her family, Tabitha could not recall

one instance where she had considered his physical form. Had he suddenly changed? Tabitha had heard of people who were once ugly ducklings, but one year of significant changes was enough to completely transform the person into a work of art. Tabitha had never personally experienced such a phenomenon; her beauty had simply grown over the years.

Shrugging her shoulders, she closed the door behind her, meeting Mandee coming from the parlour at the far end.

“Did you speak with him?” the woman asked.

“I did. I must say I feel decidedly ashamed for the way I treated him. Jeremy is a wonderful man and didn’t deserve my accusations.”

“Jeremy, you say?”

Tabitha bit back a laugh. “Don’t you start. I am forgiven, which I don’t deserve but appreciate. I really wished him to act unkindly towards me so I wouldn’t feel so terrible, but he was kind to a fault. If I ever decide to confront someone else, tie me up first. At least that will give me time to calm down and come to my senses.”

“I’m glad you have put that behind you,” said Mandee. “You would have never been able to live with yourself if you hadn’t apologised.”

That was true. Tabitha was a gentle soul who had acted out of character. Perhaps her fear had got the best of her and pushed her to do something not of her nature. Desperation was a dangerous emotion.

“Walk with me to the kitchen?” she asked the woman. “It’s nearly dinner time, and I still do not wish to sit with my parents. They will likely talk about the wedding preparations throughout the meal.”

Tabitha was not prepared to listen to her parents gush over Lord Bazeley while she sat in misery.

“But they have asked for you,” Mandee wailed. “What shall I tell them now? You were not present at breakfast or the noon meal. They’re going to suspect something.”

“Tell them I’m not hungry because I snuck into the kitchen and had a thick chunk of bread with the stew Cook had prepared for the noon meal. You can even tell them that you’ll make sure I get something to eat later this evening. Make yourself sound like a good servant; that way, they’ll know that you’re taking care of me. Which you are,” Tabitha quickly added.

Mandee bent her head back, pushing out a gust of air through her nose. “The things I do for you. You know I detest lying.”

“As do I,” Tabitha assured. “But this is necessary for my peace of mind. Do you wish me to suffer more than I have already?”

“Of course not.”

“Then do this for me until I can stand to be in their presence. Who

knows when Lord Bazeley will arrive? Then I shall be forced to suffer his presence for the rest of my life."

Mandee sighed, her shoulders falling. "Very well. I shall speak to your mother. I'll need a large apple pie after all these lies."

"You're in luck because I overheard Mary tell Baxter that Cook planned to make apple pie and custard today. You can have my helping," Tabitha offered.

Mandee's eyes held a little more spark when she left to speak with the duchess. Tabitha took herself off to the kitchens, and this time, no one batted an eyelash when they saw her enter. Instead, they freed up a chair and set a cup of tea in front of her. Tabitha found the kitchen a far warmer and cosier environment than the big dining room.

People would do well to put a table in here for at least one meal of the day. Perhaps she should think of doing that in her own home. Tabitha thought about it for a moment and shook her head. Doing that would probably start tongues wagging, or, worst of all, she would have no freedom to do anything in her house. Not as the wife of the infamous Lord Bazeley.

"Will you have my choice for the evening, My Lady?" Cook asked.

Tabitha had asked the woman to surprise her at the noon meal as she had not been bothered about what she ate at that point. However, now the thought of being surprised actually appealed to her. Perhaps she was feeling better after speaking to Jeremy. She had undoubtedly felt lighter while with him and hadn't sensed any hidden condemnation from him.

“A clear conscience does wonders,” Tabitha muttered.

“My Lady?” said Cook, sounding confused.

“Surprise me,” Tabitha replied with a smile.

Despite the reality of her situation, Tabitha strangely felt happier. Lighter, happier, and looking forward to the meal. She had either resigned herself to accept her fate or ... what? She went with the latter, not knowing what it was but was thankful for it.

Chapter 6

It was seldom that Jeremy couldn't solve a problem. He was well-known for his analytical mind and was a source of advice to those in need. Wasn't it ironic that the moment he needed his own advice, he couldn't for the life of him provide it?

Rubbing his jaw, he realised he had missed a spot while shaving this morning. Mildly cursing under his breath, Jeremy took out a little mirror, revealing the area. It wasn't large, but it was visible. He wasn't usually this careless and could only attribute his error to his brief conversation with Tabitha last evening. She had undone him with her words, and she hadn't even noticed. There wasn't a fool greater in love than he, and more a fool was he for knowing it and not being able to do anything about it.

"It's not every day a man gets to be alone in the presence of the woman who has his heart, and she doesn't know it," he told himself bitterly.

Hadn't he vowed to step away from her and amend his feelings towards her? At the very least, he should have ignored these tender emotions. Perhaps seeing a woman in need had awoken his protectiveness, and now Jeremy couldn't rest until he discovered what was going on. Tabitha had blamed her situation on him, claiming he had mismanaged the estate.

Obviously, that was not true, and thankfully Tabitha now knew this, but something about it all troubled him. Why would she think he was the one to blame? Could Storping have said something to that effect? Jeremy wouldn't put it past the duke to lay suspicion at someone else's door if it meant he could avoid confrontation. The man had done it often enough, which was why Jeremy preferred to handle

most things himself, leaving little room for error.

The books had been in a sorry mess when he first took them over, but Jeremy had managed to fix everything and fill the Brownings' coffers to the brim. The Storping estate was doing better than ever, and profits were significantly higher than when he first took over running the estate. How could there be a financial problem?

Jeremy had all the books with him, and they were correctly balanced. Of course, Storping had the keys to the main safe, while Jeremy kept a smaller one in his own house. Most of the earnings from the estate went into the larger safe, and Jeremy kept petty cash that could be used to purchase seed, small equipment, and pay for household expenses.

The estate primarily ran on the petty cash, which meant Storping's coffers would be well-stocked. The family would never need to worry about running out of money, but that seemed to be the problem. It was beyond Jeremy's understanding.

Torn between getting into the account books and removing his last bit of stubble, Jeremy merely remained in place, watching the scene outside his window. He had had renovations done on the house before moving in and installed floor-length windows in his office. It suited Jeremy well because this afforded him a lovely view of the Storping estate.

Although he had enjoyed staying in the manor, being close to Tabitha every day had not done his heart any good. Jeremy had requested the house that the duke's mother had lived in, and he was given permission provided that he kept up with the maintenance. That was a small price to pay for the relief he had at not seeing the woman he loved every day. Of course, it hadn't been easy at first. There was no longer sweet greetings from Tabitha every morning or brief

conversations if they happened to pass each other.

Jeremy had eaten up every word that had passed from her lips, going over them in his mind when he lay in bed at night. He still didn't know when affection had turned into love, but he assumed it was around two years ago at Tabitha's seventeenth birthday.

Leaving his chair, Jeremy stood at his window, his arms clasped behind his back. Perhaps it was time for him to move on. Jeremy had ambition, but he had put his dreams on hold to be near Tabitha. Now that she would soon belong to someone else, there would be nothing holding him here.

It would be sad to leave the land he had come to love, but Jeremy was already at the highest position he could attain. Being steward had afforded him many privileges that other servants did not have, but he still wasn't good enough for the duke's daughter.

"So near, and yet so very far," he muttered.

Perhaps his parting gift to Tabitha would be to determine what was going on with the estate's finances. That should set her mind at ease and possibly stop an unwanted marriage. Not that it would do him any good to stop the wedding because she would eventually marry someone else, but at least Jeremy would know that he had made her happy.

That was the basis of love, wasn't it? Wanting the happiness of the person one loved more than wanting one's own happiness. It was walking over jutting rocks, burning coals, and swimming through treacherous seas with shark-infested waters just to see a smile on the face of the one who made life worth living. Perhaps he was somewhat

melodramatic in what he would do for Tabitha, but Jeremy didn't doubt that he would go to any lengths to help her.

Jeremy took out every financial file within reach, dropping them on his desk with a loud thud. Going through them would take some time and would require putting other chores on hold, but it was worth it.

Morning had given way to the afternoon by the time Jeremy decided to look up. Tilting his head from side to side, he worked out the kinks in his neck while straightening his back. It felt good to be upright once again and away from the desk, but it would have been better if he had found something in the books to suggest the financial straits Tabitha had spoken about. Just as he thought, there was absolutely nothing amiss with the accounts.

Of course, he didn't have the book for the main safe, but Jeremy had no reason to believe there was something wrong. It was periodically replenished, and not much was taken out unless it had to do with nip money for the duchess and Tabitha or the duke's trips to the gentlemen's club. There was simply far too much to be worried about it, but a niggling doubt sat at the back of Jeremy's mind.

"Storping wouldn't do anything foolish, would he?" he asked the air about him.

No, the duke wasn't a fool. Perhaps Jeremy should ask to see the book just to tally up whatever had been spent on the estate in the last year. Jeremy had the figures with him, as well as what had gone into the safe, but he would have greater peace of mind if he saw the book for himself. It wouldn't hurt to ask to count the money, but that might be taking it too far. The duke was finicky about money at times.

A soft knock on his door drew Jeremy's attention. "Yes?"

"It's me," said a female voice.

Jeremy glanced at his pocket watch. Was it already two o'clock? "Come in, Mandee."

The woman brought in his tea and what looked like lemon biscuits, some cold meat, cheese, and fruit. He raised his eyebrows, looking at her.

"Why so much? I usually only have one biscuit with my tea."

"You missed the noon meal, so I thought you might be hungry," the woman explained.

Jeremy noticed a faint stain of colour on her cheeks and her inability to look him in the eye for too long.

"Is something wrong, Mandee? You appear flushed."

Jeremy grew alarmed when the blush deepened. Was she ill? He didn't know if he had ever known the handmaiden to fall sick.

"It must be the sun," she said. "Can I pour your tea and arrange a few eats on a plate? I can see that you're busy."

“That would be nice of you. Thank you.”

Mandee nodded, a smile brightening her face. “No thanks needed, Jeremy. What are you busy with? Those look like account books.”

“They are,” he agreed. “I’m looking for any careless mistakes or transactions and entries that do not make sense. I’ve been through everything for this year and the year before that, but I still cannot find a thing. I’m afraid I do not know where this assumption that the estate is in dire straits comes from. Someone must be mistaken.”

Mandee placed his tea before him, returning to the large tray to put some of the cold meat and fruit on a plate.

“Have you spoken to the duke about it?” she asked. “The assumption would have come from him, I believe.”

“Which bewilders me. He, more than anyone else, should know how well the estate is doing. I have worked hard these seven years to ensure his family and the Storping estate is well-taken care of. Profits are up, and each month brings new and innovative ways to increase monthly takings. What can be the problem?”

“May I sit for a while?” said Mandee. “I’ve been on my feet for some time now.”

“Of course! You shouldn’t need to ask, you know. You’re welcome in

this house whenever you wish it. If not for you, I would probably starve. I didn't even realise the time until I looked up and saw the sun's position had changed."

Jeremy was simply too invested in getting to the bottom of the rumours now circulating the property. He had heard snippets of information here and there, but nothing that really explained anything.

Jeremy watched Mandee pour herself a cup of tea and bring it to the desk. She often had tea with him, and Jeremy appreciated the company. The woman was also his primary source of information when it came to Tabitha. The women were together for most of the day and were friends before they were mistress and servant.

As he sat sipping his tea, Jeremy recalled another book he hadn't considered. Several months ago, the primary account book had gone missing, so Jeremy had resorted to starting afresh with another one. The book had mysteriously returned, and the duke had insisted on copying everything from the temporary book into the old one. Jeremy had let him, and that had been that. Oddly, he never did look to see if the duke had copied in everything correctly. Fortunately for Jeremy, he had kept the temporary book.

"I wonder ..." he began, trailing off.

Leaving his seat, Jeremy dug around in his cabinet, hunting for the book. It was only a thin one and easily missed.

"What are you looking for?" Mandee asked. "Perhaps I can help you."

“No, that is quite all right because I have found it,” he said with satisfaction, pulling the book out.

Jeremy returned to his seat, pulling the larger ledger out and flipping it to where the smaller book’s entries started. The more he read, the less confident he was about the duke’s accuracy. There were mistakes everywhere! How had Storping missed so much? Where did he get these odd amounts?

“I don’t understand,” Jeremy said more to himself. “The losses are significant, but I cannot understand why. Fifty pounds for a bag of wheat? That’s extortion and impossible.”

“Surely you didn’t put those entries in,” Mandee asked. “You’re meticulous and thorough.”

“It wasn’t me, but the duke. He insisted on ... a hundred pounds for thirty pounds of butter? What?! There must be a mistake here.”

“At least drink your tea,” Mandee insisted. “It’s getting cold, and you’ve already missed a meal. I’m sure the books can wait a little while longer.”

“It can’t, Mandee. How could I have allowed this to happen? I should have done the entries myself. The duke has never been an accurate man, but I thought he would put effort into keeping the books free of error. How wrong I was.”

How much would the losses add up to once he counted everything?

Jeremy didn't want to know. He rubbed his face roughly, angry at himself.

"Do not take this to heart, Jeremy. It's not your fault."

"But it is. It's my duty to ensure the books are accurate, and I failed. It doesn't matter that the duke did them. What matters is that I didn't see the need to look over what he had done. I truly am to blame for the situation Tabitha is in. I have made her miserable."

"It's not your fault, Jeremy," Mandee cried.

"Yes, it is."

"Oh, I hate gossiping, but I'll never forgive myself if I don't tell you what I heard. You don't deserve to question yourself when you have done everything in your power to make this estate what it is today. It simply isn't fair."

Mandee's words raised his interest. "What did you hear? Is it about this mismanagement issue?"

The woman nodded, her expression apologetic. "You will not like what I have to tell you, but it's necessary. I haven't even told Tabitha because I'm afraid of her reaction."

"You're putting a sliver of fear into me, Mandee. What is this gossip about?"

The woman looked around them as though nervous someone might overhear them and scooted closer to the desk.

“I was with the other servants while in London. They were talking about many things, mainly gossip about other people, but when they mentioned the duke, I took note.”

Mandee was unnecessarily prolonging whatever she had to say. It was all rather dramatic.

“What did they say?” Jeremy asked with more patience than he felt at that moment.

“His Grace gambled away an entire year’s income in one night and has put the estate in financial debt. He owes many people a lot of money. I doubt there’s anything left in the coffers.”

Stunned, Jeremy sat back. “No, that can’t be true.”

“It’s true,” Mandee insisted. “Why do you think Tabitha could only attend one ball? And we have not entertained as much as we used to. The duchess did not go on any shopping trips while in London either. I even heard her speak to Mrs Baggins about lowering the household expenses any way she can. You know I am not one for gossip, Jeremy, but the rumours are true. Why else would the duke force Tabitha to marry the marquess? They refuse to listen to her protests.”

Jeremy linked his hands, cupping the back of his head. This was insane! How could the duke have gambled so much money? Jeremy decided he needed Baxter to verify the story. It wasn't that he didn't believe Mandee, but the butler usually gleaned his information from reliable sources, whereas Mandee relied on servants' gossip.

"Would you mind if I left?" Jeremy asked, getting to his feet. "I need to see Baxter."

Disappointment flashed across the woman's face for just a moment, disappearing as soon as Jeremy had seen it for what it was.

"Yes, go right ahead," she said. "I'll have to take the tea back as it will be cold by the time you return. Perhaps you can have something to drink after you see Mr Baxter."

"That's an idea. Thank you for letting me know about this, Mandee. You're a godsend."

Mandee nodded. "Anything to help Tabitha."

Jeremy rushed to the door, but he could have sworn he heard Mandee say something along the lines of 'if only you loved me as you love her'. He decided he was hearing things and rushed on ahead. It was foolish even to assume that the woman could have feelings for him. Jeremy saw her as a friend and little sister. It was Tabitha that he loved, although he probably would have been better off with the handmaiden. Unfortunately, hearts didn't work that way.

Jeremy found the butler speaking to the scullery maid about washing dishes she had missed from the noon meal. Raising his hand, he caught Baxter's attention, pulling him aside.

"It has been a while since I've seen you in the servants' quarters," Baxter remarked as he drew near.

"I've never had a reason to be here until now," said Jeremy, looking around.

He felt a little paranoid that someone might overhear him and take the news back to the duke. That would prove disastrous.

"You seem troubled, Jeremy."

"I've heard some disturbing news, and I need you to confirm it for me."

The butler's brows gathered to create a heavy frown, almost hiding his beady eyes. "What is it?"

"Has Storping gambled away a year's worth of the estate's income? Is the estate in financial difficulty?"

Baxter's expression changed almost immediately. The man looked

around them, his worried gaze likely searching for eavesdroppers.

“Yes,” he whispered. “It’s all true. A friend of a friend works at the club where Storping gambled away thousands of pounds, more than you can ever hope to see in your lifetime. Furthermore, he owes money to countless people. He’s in a bad way.”

Jeremy groaned, rubbing his eyes. It was as he had feared but did not wish to believe. The foolish man!

“The duke still hasn’t learnt his lesson,” Baxter added. “He continues to disappear at night, returning in the early hours of the morning looking bleary-eyed and unhappy. You can always tell when he has lost, which is more often than not.”

Jeremy wasn’t aware of any of this because his house was some distance from the main house.

“What of this Lord Bazeley?” Jeremy asked. “Lady Browning seems to believe he isn’t a good man.”

Baxter shook his head sadly. “That is an awful fate indeed. That man is the worst of the bunch; believe me. Bazeley may not use guns to intimidate and rob people, but he sure knows how to use cards. Many a person has fallen into his trap and lost everything. Lady Browning doesn’t deserve her fate.”

Jeremy was speechless. What had the duke done?

Chapter 7

Respecting one's employer was a necessity for any servant, but Jeremy was finding it hard to do just that. Any man who gambles away his fortune and gives up his own daughter as payment was not even good enough to be called civilised! Was this normal for the higher class? Were their daughters mere commodities to be used in case of emergencies?

"And they call themselves 'proper'," he muttered to himself.

Proper what? Proper monsters? Fools? Shaking his head, Jeremy tried to focus on the plans he had drawn up for extending the vegetable farm. He had created it before he spoke to the duke, but now he wondered if it was worth it. If the vegetable farm brought in more money, the duke would just gamble it away. Why give the man the means to continue the sort of life that had allowed him to sell his daughter?

Jeremy didn't know if he even wanted to work for a man like that, but he couldn't simply abandon the estate. He had made it what it was, and people depended on him. It wasn't their fault that Storping was an imbecile without a stitch of sense in his head. As soon as that thought was formed, Jeremy felt ashamed. The duke was fallible just like any other man, and he had an addiction that had got the best of him, but did he have to exchange his own daughter? There had to be another way to work through this mess.

Unable to concentrate, Jeremy thought to call for some tea when Baxter appeared at his doorway.

“Good day, Baxter.”

“G’day, Jeremy. The master would like a word with you up at the main house.”

“Right now?”

“That’s what he said.”

Jeremy nodded. “Very well. I’ll be there in a moment.”

The butler gave one nod and left, his coattails flapping behind him. Rubbing his eyes, Jeremy stood up and stretched. What did Storping want with him? He had already spoken to the duke this morning, which had been more trying than usual.

Maintaining his respect for the man had never been so challenging for Jeremy, not even when the duke had fumbled some years ago. This was not the first time that Storping had gambled away a sizeable portion of the estate, but this was the first time he had used his daughter as some sort of bargaining chip.

Grabbing his coat from the back of his chair, Jeremy shrugged it on and followed after Baxter. If Storping wanted to see him at this time of the day, it clearly had to be important. The butler didn’t tell him where the duke would be, but Jeremy guessed the library. Not that the man was a great reader, but Storping rarely spent time in his study because there was no work for him to worry about; Jeremy dealt with everything on his behalf. However, the library had a hidden cabinet that stocked all sorts of spirits and wines, providing the perfect cover

for a man who wished to be seen as an intelligent man but was really a drunkard and a gambler. Jeremy had often found Storping tipsy with an unopened book in his hand and would then have to assist the stumbling duke to his room.

When Jeremy arrived at the house, he found that his suspicions had been correct. The duke was in the library, but he was surprisingly sober and looking rather smug.

“Good day, Your Grace,” Jeremy greeted.

“Ah, Jeremy! Come in, come in. I have much to discuss with you. Close the door behind you.”

Jeremy obeyed, shutting the door tightly and taking a seat opposite the man. He waited for the duke to say something and found himself holding his breath. Expelling it slowly, Jeremy wondered at the time of his summoning. Storping would usually be gone at this time to who knew where, but now Jeremy was starting to put the pieces together about the man’s frequent absences. The man had surely been gambling or trying to, beginning in the afternoon until well after midnight. No wonder he had put the estate into financial ruin.

“I have some good news to give you,” the man said, looking pleased with himself. “Lord Bazeley will be coming next week, and I expect you to make everything look good.”

That marquess was coming here? Of course, it was inevitable that the man would come to the estate, but Jeremy wasn’t ready yet.

“I see,” he said, his voice devoid of any emotion.

“It’s an important day,” the duke continued. “First impressions always matter the most. Can I trust you to ensure that the estate will be ready for him? He will naturally wish to inspect everything that will one day be his.”

Jeremy’s hands clenched into fists. Give a crook the estate that he had helped to grow to what it was today? But Jeremy didn’t know where it financially stood today, did he? The duke had hidden and lied his way out of a thriving estate and was now expecting him to pretend that all was well so the man could impress his soon-to-be son-in-law. This was all very wrong.

Jeremy relaxed his hands with some effort, but they still looked like they wanted to claw their way through something.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Your Grace, but what kind of man is the Marquess? I have not heard much about him.”

The duke’s jaw twitched. “What do you mean by that question?”

“His character, Your Grace. The man is marrying your daughter, after all.”

Jeremy added a smile to soften his words, hoping the duke would think the question harmless. He didn’t want the man to grow angry or believe he was unnecessarily prying.

“Well, uh, he is a good man and respected by all who meet him.”

That sounded vague. “Do you know him personally? How did you come to choose him as Lady Browning’s suitor?”

The duke’s brow creased, almost hiding his eyes beneath his bushy eyebrows. “What are you trying to say, Jeremy? Are you questioning my choice?”

“Not at all, Your Grace,” Jeremy denied. “I know how precious your daughter is to you. You would never give your daughter to the wrong person. I’m merely asking because I’m curious about the man I will one day work for.”

The duke’s cheeks grew pink. “There’s no reason to ask. I have heard enough about Lord Bazeley to know that he is a good man.”

Jeremy had a feeling that the research Storping had done concerned the marquess’s wealth.

I wouldn’t put it past him to have heard about the marquess’s coffers during one of his gambling sprees and decided that Tabitha was his only way to tempt the man to part with some of his money.

“Oh, so you know of him? You don’t know him personally?”

“That’s a lot of questions there, Jeremy,” the duke said, shifting in his

seat.

“Don’t mind me, Your Grace. I am always curious about new people, but I must admit that I am wary about the people who come into close contact with the family. Why not postpone the wedding for a little while so you can better investigate the man’s background? I think it’s important to know everything about the man who will marry your daughter.”

The duke’s eyes widened just a little before narrowing into slits. “What are you trying to say?”

Jeremy knew that the duke hated being questioned about his decisions, but could the man not set aside his pride and think about his daughter?

“Am I wrong to be concerned, Your Grace? If I am, please forgive me. It was not my intention to upset you.”

Jeremy watched the duke draw up to his full height in the chair and look down his nose at him.

“I think it best that you keep to running the estate. Commenting on things that are out of your reach is not flattering for a man in your position.”

Jeremy could have laughed. He better than anyone understood the estate’s financial situation and why the duke was giving his daughter away. A person didn’t have to be high class to know that. Jeremy resented the duke for implying that he wouldn’t understand what the

man was doing and why.

“Forgive me, Your Grace. I should not have spoken out of turn.”

“I know why you did it, Jeremy. You have feelings for my daughter, don’t you? Do not think I have not seen the way you look at her when you think no one is looking. I think everyone has noticed your gazes in Tabitha’s direction. I suppose I cannot blame you because my daughter is beautiful, but know your place.”

Blushing furiously, Jeremy nodded. “Yes, Your Grace.”

He couldn’t even deny staring at Tabitha; the duke had caught him red-handed. Storping’s smile couldn’t have looked more satisfied than it did now.

“I’m glad that we understand each other,” he said. “I trust you not to bring up this topic about Lord Bazeley again.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The Duke nodded. “You may go. Just remember to get everything ready for the marquess’s arrival. I will hold you personally accountable if anything goes wrong.”

Jeremy could tell the duke was covering all his bases and ensuring that only he could be blamed if the marquess wasn’t happy about something. That meant Jeremy had to be mindful of everything that

could go wrong and make sure it didn't. That wasn't fair at all. There was always the possibility of something going wrong, especially when people like the duke constantly stepped out and did whatever they pleased. How did a person control their employers?

"Yes, Your Grace," he replied.

What else could he say? Jeremy stood up, bowed, and left his master's presence.

The duke had not said which day the Marquess would come, only that he would arrive early next week. That could be anything between Sunday and Wednesday, giving Jeremy less than a week to 'foolproof' the estate from any mishaps. How did one do that? Jeremy was a meticulous man and ran a tight ship, but even he was aware of challenges that could pop up at any time.

One of the farmers could lose control of their herd, a gardener could make a mistake and ruin a hedge, the Cook could have a bad day and burn the food, and the duke himself could become drunk and make a fool of himself. Would Jeremy have to take the blame for all of that?

"Knowing the duke? Yes," he muttered under his breath.

Jeremy gently pulled on Wolfe's reins, urging him to the right. He had just been to the tenants to speak to them about Lord Bazeley's coming and how the marquess might wish to meet them. After all, the man was due to become the new master of the estate, especially if he was the one to pay the duke's debts.

Jeremy had hated every minute of talking about the marquess and explaining that the man was to marry Tabitha soon. Each word had tasted like gall and had left his stomach in tight knots.

“Good day, Jeremy!” a woman called out.

Jeremy turned his head, waving when he saw Mandee. “How are you?” he asked as she came closer.

“Well, thank you. Cook tells me that you did not have your usual light meal this afternoon. Is anything ailing you?”

Other than the fact that he had to cater to a scoundrel who was going to marry the woman he loved? A woman that was out of his reach? Then no, nothing was ailing him.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’ve just been busy doing my rounds.”

“Perhaps you would like your meal now? Dinner will be a little later than usual today,” the woman explained. “One of the stoves suddenly stopped working, and Cook has been going through a mild rage. Fortunately, we have three others, but it significantly slows her down. I’ve just been to the duchess to let her know. Fortunately, the duke is not here. He hates to wait for his meals.”

The duke had left? Jeremy didn’t need many guesses to know where the man had gone. Stiffening, Jeremy tried his best not to let the emotion flit across his face.

“I am not feeling hungry, Mandee. Why don’t you see to Lady Browning? She must need your assistance with something.”

Disappointment flashed in the woman’s eyes before she lowered them and reached out to pet Wolfe.

“She has gone for a walk and wishes to be alone,” said Mandee. “The matter of marriage has her under the hatches.”

As it did him, but Jeremy knew he could never experience what Tabitha was feeling.

“I can imagine. Lord Bazeley is not a man that any woman should know, yet she is to marry him. Storping is dead set on that.”

Mandee sighed, raising her head. “I know. I have done and said everything I possibly can to calm her, but it hasn’t worked. She hardly sleeps at night worrying about her upcoming wedding.”

The thought of Tabitha lying awake at night and having dark circles under her eyes troubled him.

“Perhaps you can make her some calming tea in the evenings or that milk you once made for me some weeks ago. What was it again? It worked wonders for me. I do not think that I have ever slept that well.”

“Lavender milk with honey,” Mandee said, smiling. “My mother taught me the recipe, and her mother before that. The women in my family are what many call herbalists. The gift has not fallen to me, but I do recall some of the recipes used. The lavender milk was a favourite of mine growing up.”

“I’m sure it will work wonders for Lady Browning’s sleep. I’m surprised you haven’t given it to her yet.”

Mandee lowered her eyes once more. “I will give it to her this evening.”

“Let me know tomorrow if you succeeded in getting her to have a restful sleep. We wouldn’t want her growing ill.”

“Of course not.”

Jeremy watched Mandee give a last pat and a kiss on Wolfe’s cheek and step away. Digging in her pocket, she drew out a perfect red apple and offered it to the horse. Wolfe immediately took the apple and happily chomped on it.

“No wonder Wolfe adores you,” he said, chuckling.

“If only you adored me,” Jeremy thought he heard her mutter.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I adore him just as much,” Mandee replied. “He is a beautiful horse.”

Oh. He thought he had heard differently, but Jeremy decided he was wrong. Why would Mandee talk about adoring him? They were just friends, after all.

Jeremy’s mind drifted to Tabitha. If she was taking a walk, then she had to be somewhere around here. Perhaps he could stay a little while until he saw her.

“Thank you for worrying about me and informing me about Tabitha’s state,” he said, already pulling Wolfe away. “I have a few more things to do, so I’ll be leaving.”

Mandee seemed reluctant as she slid her hand against Wolfe’s leg, patting it affectionately before stepping back.

“You’re a busy man, Jeremy, but don’t be so busy that your health is affected. I can only look after one person at a time, and Tabitha is my priority.”

That sounded strange to him. “I would never ask you to give up your time to worry about me, Mandee.”

Mandee smiled sadly. “You wouldn’t have to.”

She turned away from him and hurried back to the house. Jeremy felt that something had passed between them, but he had no idea what it was. Shrugging his shoulders, he went in search of Tabitha.

It took him a good fifteen minutes to locate her, and by then, the sun had lowered. It was evening soon, and he hadn't done everything he had set out to do. However, that didn't matter to him now that he could see her. Tabitha looked as morose as she was the other day, but she was swinging a little more.

Jeremy stood by and watched her kick at the ground before lifting both legs and pushing her weight back to gain momentum on the swing. A tendril of hair had come loose from the simple topknot on her head and framed her face in the way Jeremy longed to reach out and touch her cheek.

Jeremy was careful never to touch Tabitha unnecessarily, not wanting a reminder that her skin was as soft as it looked. He might help her down a carriage now and then, but she always wore gloves that hid her hands away. That worked well for him.

Approaching her, Jeremy quickly ran a hand through his hair to tame anything that may be sticking out. Tabitha must have heard him because she looked up, surprising him when he saw her eyes were rimmed with red. She had been crying! It took much effort to remain on Wolfe and not leap down and fly to her side to console her.

"Good day, Mr Gibbs," she greeted.

"It might be a good evening," he said with a smile. "The sun has lowered, and I can see a bit of the moon already."

“But the moon is always there,” Tabitha argued.

“Right you are. What are you doing here at this hour? Usually, you would be inside.”

Tabitha looked away. “I needed some fresh air to clear my head. Things have been a little ... challenging lately.”

A little? That was the understatement of the year! Jeremy knew Tabitha had to be frightened about the prospect of marrying a man like Lord Bazeley. How would any innocent woman feel about marrying a man who was nothing more than a well-disguised criminal?

“I know,” he said softly. “This may sound silly given what you’re going through, but how do you feel today?”

Jeremy already knew because he had spoken to Mandee, but he wanted to hear the answer from Tabitha’s lips. He hoped she trusted him enough to tell the truth.

Tabitha brought her gaze to his and smiled. “Better than yesterday, thank you.”

Then why did he see the pain in her eyes? Had he not earned the right for her to confide in him?

“I’m glad to hear that, My Lady. Would you excuse me? I still have a few errands to complete.”

“Of course. Good evening, Mr Gibbs.”

“Good evening, My Lady.”

Jeremy tugged once on the reins to start Wolfe moving away. He no longer wished to see the pain in her eyes, knowing that he couldn’t do anything about it. As he went his way, Jeremy started to think about the situation. Could he really do nothing? Surely he could use the contacts he had to look into Lord Bazeley’s background?

“Why didn’t I think about this before?” he asked himself in irritation.

That was a brilliant idea! Jeremy had many business associates who had feelers in every part of England. One of them was bound to come up with something about the marquess. If Jeremy managed to find the information he needed against the man, he would use it to expose him. The duke would have to listen to him and put a stop to this wedding before it took place.

Urged on by the idea, Jeremy galloped to his house and jumped down from his horse, nearly tripping over a stone that had seemingly jumped in front of him. He immediately wrote a letter to all his associates once he got to his desk, asking for their discretion in the matter. If the duke refused to investigate Lord Bazeley, then by golly, Jeremy would do it. He couldn’t just sit by and watch Tabitha’s life ruined by her father’s hasty and wrong decision.

Would he be able to find the information? Jeremy had no idea, but he was willing to try anything. Saving Tabitha was now his first priority, and the estate was second. The duke should have had the same mindset and thought about his gambling ways before he landed in the mess he was in today.

However, there was no point in dwelling on what the duke should have done because that would change nothing. It was clear to Jeremy that it was up to him to save Tabitha.

Chapter 8

There were times when a woman was likely to go through manic episodes in her life. This could have easily been such a time for Tabitha, but Mandee was watching her like a hawk.

“You will not rip those dresses to shreds,” Mandee warned her. “I will tie you to the chair if I have to.”

Tabitha scowled at her but held onto the scissors in her hands. The seamstress had brought the first three dresses from the set her mother had ordered two weeks ago. They were beautiful and showed a skilful hand, but they represented everything Tabitha didn’t want.

“Destroying these dresses will prolong the wedding, Mandee,” Tabitha tried to explain. “Is that not what we want?”

“That will solve nothing. Your parents will have both our heads if you destroy them.”

“How can they have my head when I’m to marry that man?”

Mandee narrowed her eyes and planted her hands on her hips. “So, ’tis my head that will roll?”

Tabitha sighed and rolled her eyes, throwing the scissors away from her. She would have to come up with a different way to keep herself

from marrying Lord Bazeley, a way that would not get anyone in trouble.

"I'm glad you've finally calmed down," said Mandee. "Now that we've wasted a good half hour, why don't we get ready? Your mother said the marquess could arrive any minute now."

"I have already told you that I will not meet him. I shall lock myself in my room."

Mandee cupped her forehead, massaging it. "You're going to be the death of me," she mumbled.

"Well, he is going to be the death of me," Tabitha countered. "So I suppose we are both going to die untimely deaths."

Mandee laughed, the sound coming from her belly and out through her mouth in cheerful tones. How could any of this be amusing to her? Tabitha cast the woman a displeased frown before flopping on the bed and burying her head under a pillow. Maybe she could just pretend the world didn't exist, and everything would go away.

She started when she felt fingers tickle the back of her calves. Biting down on her lip, Tabitha pulled her legs in and curled into a tight ball. Unfortunately, her feet were exposed. Fingers tickled the arches of her feet until she couldn't take any more and came up laughing.

"Oh, all right!" she cried, still giggling. "You have my attention."

Grinning, Mandee nodded. “This trick always works. Now, I need you to choose a dress because you cannot sit in your underthings for the whole day. Imagine if your mother and father were to come into the room and find you like this? They’ll wonder what I’m doing.”

“I’ll tell them that you’re doing their bidding, and I’m trying hard to go against it.”

“Oh, Tabitha. You need to know how to pick your battles. Refusing to dress and meet Lord Bazeley will not go well for you. Your father expects you to be down soon, and here you are prancing about in your underthings.”

“I would hardly call this prancing,” said Tabitha. “It’s more avoiding and running away.”

“Which I would like you to stop. Please, just choose a dress and let’s put it on. I still have your hair to do. Do not get me into trouble.”

Tabitha scratched her head as frustration ate away at her sanity. She couldn’t believe the day had finally arrived where she would be put on display. She felt like a slave forced onto a platform while people called out what they were willing to pay to purchase her. Tabitha had learned about such things from the history books in their library, never thinking that she would feel like a slave one day.

The Roman Empire had seemed to be the worst of the lot, not caring who was sold as a slave, especially if the people were from lands and tribes they had conquered. The only thing that appeared to matter was one’s Roman citizenship and status in society. If one didn’t have that, they were fair game for any enterprising person to reduce them to

slavery and sell them to the highest bidder.

Gladiators could fight for their freedom and then only if the emperor was willing to give it, and house slaves were sometimes granted freedom by kind owners. If it was human nature to want one's freedom, why did no one understand that Tabitha wanted hers?

"What are you thinking about?" asked Mandee. "It had better not be another plan to avoid the marquess. I do not know how much more I can take of your antics."

If there was one thing Tabitha had learnt about gaining freedom, it was to have a plan and a good strategy to execute it. Perhaps her random acts of defiance were not the way to go about doing things. Tabitha obviously needed a better way to rid herself of this marriage.

"I'm wondering which dress to choose," she finally told the woman. "I usually like blue and green, but I do not like the marquess. I suppose that leaves me with the pink one."

"I had a feeling you would choose the least flattering," said Mandee. "Fortunately for me, you can never look ugly. Hold your arms up so I can slip it on and secure it."

Tabitha did as Mandee bid without argument, shivering slightly when the cool material glided over her body. It was a perfect fit as she had expected, but Tabitha had hoped the seamstress had got her measurements wrong.

"There," said Mandee, adjusting the short sleeve. "Doesn't that look

lovely?"

"The dress or me?"

"Both. Sit down so I can do your hair. I fear we do not have much time, so a simple braid and then a twist up with pins in place will have to do."

Mandee brushed Tabitha's hair until it shone, quickly plaiting it and twisting it to form an updo. Tabitha had to admit that the effect was lovely.

"I did not want to look pretty for the marquess," she complained.

"We spoke about this already," Mandee reminded her. "Do not do anything to upset your parents today, Tabitha. And I mean it. Your father is in no mood to be embarrassed by his only daughter. You need to control yourself today."

"I'm in a dress, aren't I?"

Mandee closed her eyes briefly. "Yes, you are in a dress. I'll get your shoes and perfume."

Tabitha nodded and leaned her elbows on her vanity table. What could she do to get out of meeting Lord Bazeley today? She could pretend to hurt her ankle and insist on remaining upstairs while they welcomed him downstairs. Slowly smiling, Tabitha straightened and

stood up. Now it was just to find the spot to hurt her ankle.

She wouldn't be foolish and do any real damage, but it had to be believable. There was still a loose floorboard somewhere outside her room that was supposed to have been taken care of weeks ago, but somehow it remained forgotten about. If she caught her foot on it and fell ... Mandee would know what she had done, but no one else would.

"Are you done fetching those shoes?" Tabitha asked.

"Yes. I've decided on the silver shoes and floral perfume. That should please your parents."

Tabitha wanted to ask what about her but thought better of it. She didn't need to look presentable for anyone because she wouldn't be part of the procession.

After slipping her shoes on and having Mandee spritz her, Tabitha left her room and headed straight for the loose floorboard. She didn't hesitate once, not even when Mandee called out to her to be careful. Stepping in front of the raised part, Tabitha made sure to drag her foot against it. The floorboard instantly hooked on her shoe, knocking Tabitha off balance.

She quickly threw her hands out as she went down, momentarily jarring herself and rattling her teeth when she hit the floor. She hadn't meant to fall so hard, and judging by the feeling of her knee, she was probably bleeding just a little.

I was supposed to hurt my ankle, not my knee. I suppose it will have to do.

At least she was injured. Surely her mother would confine her to a chair or her room if she saw the bloodstain on Tabitha's dress?

"What on earth are you trying to do?" asked a worried Mandee as she knelt next to Tabitha. "You knew very well that the loose floorboard was there. Why did you walk into it?"

"For the same reasons that I did not want to put on this dress."

Mandee brought her hands together as though in prayer, touching them to her face. She looked horrified.

"'Tis not as bad as you think it is," Tabitha insisted. "'Tis but a little scratch, although I do think I shall ache tomorrow. Would you help me to my parlour and call my mother?"

Mandee lowered her hands. "What next? Are you going to throw yourself from the roof? Jump into the river?"

"I'm not that foolish!"

"You just hurt yourself to avoid a man!" said Mandee, her voice rising. "What am I supposed to think?"

"Goodness, Mandee," Tabitha complained. "It was a little fall, and I

shall ache only a tiny bit, but it's enough to hopefully avoid the marquess. Help me stand up."

Mandee held Tabitha's hands and pulled her up. Tabitha could already feel the twinges of pain, but it wasn't severe.

"Call my mother, please. I'll take myself to the parlour."

Mandee turned without a word, hiding her grim expression and hurrying downstairs. Making her way to the parlour, Tabitha winced only slightly.

"It was worth it," she whispered firmly to herself.

Tabitha continued to convince herself of that all the way to the parlour, knowing that she wasn't crazy. It was pure desperation.

He was here! Tabitha hobbled to the window, wanting to see if she was right. Sure enough, Leo's carriage was driving up the path. Tabitha recognised the coat of arms on the door, having seen it later that evening of her first and only ball in London.

Opening her window slightly, she leaned down to see the people who had come out to see him. Mandee had said that her father expected all the household servants to line up and allow the marquess to greet and inspect them. Tabitha had a feeling she would have been told to do

the same thing if not for her minor knee injury.

Her mother had not been impressed about that, calling Tabitha clumsy. Tabitha had even torn the dress slightly, rendering it ruined. However, the duchess couldn't do much about it. It was no use trying to force Tabitha downstairs when it hurt to be on her feet too long.

"I hate to think what will happen once my knee has healed," she mumbled.

It wouldn't take long, but Tabitha wanted to milk the injury for as long as she could. Stalling her meeting with Leo would give her more time to come up with a better plan. There had to be something she could do.

Leaning on her arms, Tabitha watched the great fanfare with which the marquess was welcomed. Her father was the first person to meet Leo at the carriage, shaking his hands and momentarily pausing when he looked into the carriage. What had her father seen? Tabitha leaned a little further out, squinting her eyes to see who was in the carriage with the marquess. A woman eventually came out, allowing her hand to be taken and kissed.

"Papa never mentioned anything about another woman," Tabitha said to herself. "I wonder who she is?"

Tabitha jerked a little when the door behind her opened, thinking it was somehow Leo. But that would be foolish because Leo was down there. She watched the door slowly open to reveal a sheepish-looking Jeremy.

“Mr Gibbs!” she breathed. “Thank goodness, it’s you.”

“I am not being too forward by coming in here unannounced, My Lady?”

“Not at all. Come in. Was there something you needed?”

He shook his head. “None at all. I thought to come and watch all the faff happening below with you. I didn’t fancy meeting that scoundrel. I take it those are your sentiments as well?”

Tabitha bit her lower lip, wondering if she should reveal what she had done to remain upstairs.

“If I tell you something potentially foolish, do you promise not to judge me?”

Jeremy pulled his brows together, tilting his head slightly. “Why would I ever judge you? I do not think you can put a foot out of place.”

She grimaced. “I am not worthy of such trust, Mr Gibbs. I’m afraid I was a little underhanded in ensuring I was not forced to meet my fiancé.”

“What did you do?”

Tabitha showed him the little tear on her dress. “I used a loose floorboard to my advantage and fell. It hurt my knee, so now I have been happily confined upstairs. Before you ask, it does not hurt much. ’Tis only a twinge of pain.”

Tabitha could see the whites of Jeremy’s eyes as he stared at her in alarm. He kept looking at her knee and face in quick succession. Finally, he let out a shaky breath and shook his head.

“I never took you for one to go to these measures, My Lady.”

Jeremy did not seem pleased with her. “Do not be like Mandee, Mr Gibbs. I only did what was necessary. Now, are you going to complain about what I did or watch what is unfolding below us?”

Tabitha didn’t wait for a reply but turned to the open window and leaned out to observe the guests.

Leo had moved onto the servants while the other woman hung back, merely nodding her head at everyone. Tabitha’s lips curled in distaste as she watched Leo inspect the servants, reminded of her thoughts earlier that day about the slaves who would stand on a platform to be reviewed by slave buyers. Her father was essentially selling everyone, not just her.

“They don’t look impressed with him,” Jeremy commented by her side.

“Not at all. None of them are smiling.”

“I don’t blame them. I do not know what your father will say when I see him later this evening. He expected me to be down there with the others, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

Tabitha pulled her head back when she heard the angry bitterness in Jeremy’s voice. He had never gone against the duke in anything, yet he had done it today. Was it for her benefit, or did he really not like the marquess? Somehow, Tabitha knew it was for her sake.

“I do not wish you to be in trouble for my sake, Mr Gibbs.”

He smiled strangely, searching her eyes. “Are you so concerned for me?”

His gaze unsettled her. Tabitha looked away, shrugging one shoulder. “I am concerned about everyone on this estate. I do not want anyone to receive a scolding from Papa.”

Tabitha heard his sigh and almost looked at him, but something told her she didn’t want to see what was written on his face. It was a peculiar feeling that she didn’t understand.

“In that case, there is no need to fret. I will merely tell your father that I had business to attend to.”

Tabitha nodded, knowing her father would accept that excuse.

When Leo moved inside, Tabitha quickly went to the inside window that looked down into the front part of the house. Tabitha opened it as noiselessly as she could, motioning for Jeremy to come over.

“He is about to meet Mandee, Baxter, and the other household servants,” she told him unnecessarily.

“I doubt they will give him a warmer welcome than the other servants did,” Jeremy commented.

“Does everyone know about Lord Bazeley?” she asked,

“I imagine they do. Servants talk a lot among themselves, and the word was bound to get out. They must know he is nothing but a high-class criminal.”

“The worst sort,” Tabitha added.

The servants either bowed or curtsied, each of their expressions as blank as the next one. The duke had to be wondering what was going on because his servants were usually a jovial lot.

There is absolutely nothing jovial about that man. I really wish to know who that woman behind him is. She follows him like his shadow.

Could she be a sister? Tabitha doubted it because they looked nothing alike. A random thought suddenly occurred to her, making her turn to Jeremy in question.

"How on earth did you manage to get here? You could not have come from the front entrance."

"I took the servants' staircase to avoid everyone," he admitted. "I had heard you were not going to be part of the welcome committee and came to look for you."

Tabitha nodded, looking back at the guests. "That makes sense."

They continued to watch until Lord Bazeley, his companion, and her parents moved to the drawing-room. Tabitha knew they would be there for hours and felt safe enough where she was.

"Well, I suppose that's that. My life is over now that he is in the house."

"Do not say that, My Lady," Jeremy admonished. "Your life has barely begun."

Tabitha raised a delicate eyebrow. "Are you certain about that? You know the man I am about to marry. He isn't precisely marriage material. Leo is more of a bandit, I think. He may not wave a pistol around, but he is just as dangerous."

“I understand that, but you should not give up on your life so soon,” Jeremy explained. “You are not married yet, are you?”

“No, but I shall be soon enough if I do not find a solution to my problem.”

A pained look entered Jeremy’s eyes, but he quickly looked away from her. Was he so concerned about her? Tabitha found that touching.

“Thank you for being so kind to me, Mr Gibbs, especially after how I treated you some days ago. You have a forgiving heart.”

Jeremy chuckled, but it didn’t sound cheerful. “I do not think I am all that forgiving. I am not so good that I cannot go to any lengths to help someone I care about.”

Did he mean her? “Anyone willing to go to lengths to help another is good and kind in my books. Leo certainly does not have any of these qualities, if he has any at all, besides being charming and tricking young women. You, on the other hand, are sweet and kind. Stay just the way you are, Mr Gibbs.”

Jeremy grinned, his first genuine one since the day. “Why, thank you, My Lady. That means a lot coming from you.”

Tabitha nodded, pushing away from the windowsill. “It’s true. Now, I think you should return to your duties before Papa calls you. He did say something about taking Leo on a walk through the estate. I do not know if he means today or tomorrow.”

Jeremy straightened as well, his expression suddenly serious. “I am always here for you if you ever need help, My Lady. Please don’t hesitate to call for me. Mandee usually knows where I am.”

How could Jeremy possibly help her? Tabitha had no idea, but Jeremy seemed to think he could.

“That is kind of you, Jeremy. Please hurry along before anyone sees you in here.”

Jeremy seemed a little disappointed by her lack of enthusiasm for his offer. What else did he expect? She hardly knew how to get rid of Leo; what could a servant possibly do? Leo seemed untouchable.

As Tabitha watched Jeremy’s figure disappear behind the door, she found herself admiring him again. He was a good looking man; any woman would admire him. Satisfied with her explanation, Tabitha dug out the book she had hidden behind a cushion yesterday, carefully fell into a comfortable chair, and started reading.

Chapter 9

Tabitha didn't know whether or not she liked the book she was reading. The entire story seemed to be centred around a hero rescuing the heroine. Now, Tabitha wasn't against being saved, but why on earth was the heroine falling into trouble at every turn? Many times it had been her fault because the heroine hadn't listened to her common sense.

Disgusted, Tabitha tossed the book away. She did not need a story about weak heroines right now, but a story that would give her the courage to do whatever she needed to. It was rather difficult thinking up effective plans when Tabitha had never needed to run away from anything or anyone. Or perhaps she had but had never had the courage to go through with it.

Tabitha was beginning to realise that getting everything she could possibly want was not good for her thinking abilities. It had made her lazy and spoilt, and now she was paying for her weaknesses.

There had to be something she could do! Tabitha had toyed with the idea of running away, but where would she go? She had never been by herself before and wouldn't know the first thing about living life. Injuring herself again was out of the question. Her knee was aching a little more now, but it wasn't a shooting, sharp pain. It was more a dull throbbing pain that reminded her of what she had done today.

The door opened without a knock, admitting her mother inside. Tabitha should have known it was her mother. The duchess did not think that knocking on doors was necessary as she was the mistress of the house, but Tabitha disagreed.

“How are you doing, dear?” her mother asked. “Do you feel a little better?”

Tabitha had to think before she answered. If she said yes, her mother might force her to meet Lord Bazeley, but Tabitha would not be able to move freely around the house if she said no.

“Uh ... it’s throbbing,” she said truthfully. “But the bleeding has stopped.”

It had stopped a while ago, but Tabitha just felt like adding that in.

“I’m glad to hear that, dear. I don’t suppose you’ll be able to change out of that ruined dress and put on something else?”

Tabitha didn’t like the sound of that question. “Why?”

Her mother briefly looked at her hands. “Well, your father insists that you come down and join us in the drawing-room. This is Lord Bazeley’s first time in our home, and you should be available to greet your own fiancé.”

Tabitha should have known! Leo must have asked for her, and now her father was jumping through hoops to ensure that Tabitha came down.

“But what of my injury?”

Two little spots of colour appeared high on the duchess' cheeks. "Your father said you can hobble downstairs with his walking stick. He really wants you to meet Lord Bazeley."

"I have already met him."

"That was different," her mother insisted. "You were meeting for the first time then. However, now he is your intended."

"Through no fault of my own."

"Tabitha!" the duchess scolded. "Can you at least show some appreciation that a man like Lord Bazeley has agreed to marry you, knowing that you do not have a dowry to give him?"

Tabitha coughed back a snort of surprise. "Are you saying it's my fault that we no longer have the money?"

"That is not what I am saying, Tabitha," her mother argued and sighed. "Please, just get ready to come down with me. I am tired of arguing."

Tabitha couldn't believe it. Her father would rather see his daughter in pain than tell his guest that she was not well. What sort of man was he? Tabitha had always doted on her father and believed that he could do no wrong, but this situation said differently.

“I will need assistance going down,” she finally told her mother.

“I’ll tell Mandee to assist you. Please do not do anything to keep yourself from coming down,” her mother warned. “Your father will not like it.”

The duchess said it as though she knew the knee injury had been planned. Well, it had, but Tabitha hadn’t had days to practice it and make it seem more believable. She had thought on her feet, thinking that it would save her today, but her father had other ideas.

Her mother left, and moments later, Mandee appeared. The woman’s face was grim as she looked at Tabitha struggle to her feet.

“Do not say it,” said Tabitha.

“Say what? That you should never have hurt yourself? Fine, I shall not say it.”

“But you just did,” Tabitha accused. “How was I to know that Papa would still insist?”

Mandee said nothing but helped her hobble to the door. Tabitha wasn’t sure how she would walk down the stairs, but she was sure she could manage it. She didn’t want to, but she could.

“I’m really upset with you,” said Mandee after a while.

“I can tell.”

“No, I don’t think you can. You’re like a sister to me, Tabitha. It pains me to know that you had to hurt yourself just to avoid a man. There has to be a better way.”

“If you know of one, then I am all ears.”

They came to the top of the stairs and stopped. Tabitha had never noticed how many steps there were until now. The task looked a tad daunting, but she was confident that she could do it.

“Lean more heavily on me,” Mandee advised. “And place your good foot on each step.”

“Yes, Mother,” Tabitha joked, trying to lighten the air between them.

“I’m glad you’re well enough to jest. I am so angry with you that I do not wish to look you in the face.”

Tabitha winced a little as she pushed a little too hard on her injured knee. “I’m sorry if I upset you, Mandee. You know that was never my intention. I panicked, and this was the result of it. I promise not to do anything so foolish again. Now, please smile before you curdle all the tea I have drunk today.”

“So you think a little apology will make everything better?”

“Yes?” said Tabitha hopefully.

“You are one fortunate woman, Tabitha Browning,” Mandee replied with a shake of her head. “We only have three steps to go.”

Tabitha risked a brief glance at her friend, noticing that her expression wasn’t as dark as before.

“Do you forgive me?” she asked.

Mandee shrugged her shoulders. “I suppose I do. I can never stay angry with you for too long.”

Tabitha laid her head on Mandee’s shoulder and gave her a side embrace. She could see the little smile play about her friend’s lips, but Mandee was probably still too annoyed to let it show.

They stopped at the drawing-room door and argued under their breaths about who should knock. It seemed that wasn’t necessary because the door swung open.

“You’re finally here!” the duke exclaimed, his cheerful voice not matching the look of displeasure on his face. “We have been waiting for you.”

“I apologise for my tardiness, Papa. I’m afraid I cannot move as quickly as I wish to with my injured knee.”

To prove her point, Tabitha limped forward, screwing up her face into one of pain. It wasn’t all that bad, but she wanted her father to feel guilty about calling her down.

“How unfortunate, dear,” her father commented. “Of course, we understand. Let me help you to a seat.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary, Papa,” Tabitha objected. “Mandee is more than capable, and it helps that we are about the same height.”

“Nonsense, dear. I shall take you straight to Lord Bazeley. He has been waiting to see you since the night you met.”

An involuntary shiver travelled down her spine at the mention of the marquess waiting to see her. Tabitha could never see him in the same light now that she knew what type of person he was.

“Oh, very well, Papa,” said Tabitha, knowing that her father wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

Mandee disengaged from Tabitha, giving her a light squeeze on her hand before leaving the room. Tabitha was sorry to see her go, but she had no other choice. She took her father’s outstretched hand and hissed when he took a large step forward, jerking her injured knee.

Instead of her father apologising, Leo came forward and took her hand. Tabitha tried not to cringe as the man's hand covered hers, but she didn't quite manage it. Fortunately for her, no one noticed. They were all too busy staring at the marquess.

"You must be more gentle," he admonished the duke. "She does have an injury after all."

The duke smiled a little too smugly for Tabitha's liking. Had he purposefully caused her some pain to have the marquess come to her rescue? The thought hurt her.

"Since you will be her husband soon, perhaps you should escort her to her seat," Tabitha's father suggested.

"With pleasure, Your Grace."

Leo pulled her closer, supporting her arm as he led her to a chair. She noted it was next to the one he had been sitting on moments earlier and inwardly groaned. It was the last place she wished to be in. The woman who sat on his other side regarded Tabitha with open hostility, only changing her expression to one of politeness when she found Tabitha looking at her. What on earth was that all about? Why did the woman dislike her despite them not knowing each other?

"Sit down and give that knee a rest, Tabitha," said Leo, helping her into the seat.

Tabitha meekly thanked him, snatching her hand away from his at her first opportunity. Leo undoubtedly noticed, but he merely smiled and

sat down next to her.

"Now that we're all here, why don't we start the introductions?" her father said. "Tabby, you already know Lord Bazeley, but the woman to his right is Lady Whittier, his half-sister."

"Nice to meet you, Lady Whittier," Tabitha dutifully said.

"Call me Ellie," the woman replied. "I think I shall call you Tabby as your father did. It's an adorable name. It reminds me of a kitten I used to have."

Tabitha didn't want the woman calling her anything but Tabitha or even Lady Browning, but she could see that she didn't have a choice in this.

"We're one big happy family, and we're not even married yet," said Leo, grinning. "How are you, Tabitha? I must admit I was disappointed that my wife-to-be did not meet me like the others. However, there is always a next time. You'll be the best dutiful wife in no time at all."

Tabitha raised her eyebrows at that. The man was already dictating how she should act, and they were not even married yet! What had happened to the charming version of him?

It had been fake, hadn't it? The man is as charming as a hornet's nest.

“Giving orders already, Leo?” his sister said, laughing. “At least give the little woman some time to grow accustomed to us, then you can order her however you like!”

Little woman? Order her around? Tabitha found she didn’t like that at all. Not knowing what to say, she decided to remain quiet. Let the ‘adults’ talk amongst themselves. However, that wasn’t what Leo wanted.

“I imagine your father has explained everything to you?” he asked her. “We shall be married by August.”

“Is that not a little too quickly?” Tabitha ventured to say. “Why not get to know each other a little better.”

That way, she could have more time to figure out how to get rid of him and this marriage plan.

“Why?” Ellie asked. “You met each other once already, and your father has already given his permission. There’s no reason to wait.”

Tabitha pulled her head back slightly and stared at the woman. Why had she answered and not Leo? That wasn’t a ladylike thing to do at all. Leo didn’t seem to mind, but Tabitha did. She looked at her parents, who seemed surprised as well. Let them see the family they were marrying her into.

“Ellie is right, Tabitha,” Leo added. “Everything has been set and organised already.”

“It has?” Tabitha asked weakly.

No one had told her anything about the wedding planning being confirmed already. Who had planned it?

“But Mama has not had the time to discuss anything with me yet,” Tabitha argued.

“That is because I am the one who organised everything,” Ellie declared. “All you need is a church, vicar, and a place to have your ceremony. The banns will be read tomorrow in both our parishes, but you and Leo will be married sooner than three weeks.”

Tabitha swallowed some of her spit and coughed. Less than three weeks? That would require a special licence. Why was Leo so keen to marry her soon?

“You’ll be Lady Bazeley in no time at all,” Ellie continued. “And then I can train you to be a good little wife for my ... brother.”

The last word was dragged out as Ellie looked at her brother, winking her eye and laughing. Tabitha found the whole exchange terribly forward and in bad taste. Ellie did not act like any lady she had come across. Tabitha glanced at her parents again, noting her father’s horrified expression. The duchess was still trying to appear neutral to the exchanges, but her face showed her disapproval.

Leo slumped a little in his chair, resting his head on the back of it. She

had never seen him lounge like this, acting as though the house was his already. It technically would be his house once they were married, but that didn't mean he had to take over. The fact that her father wasn't doing or saying anything was mind-boggling.

"So, what do you people do to liven up your days?" Ellie asked. "I have no notion of how country people entertain themselves."

"Well, uh, we play music," Tabitha's mother offered. "Write letters, go for walks, read – that sort of thing."

Tabitha watched Ellie pull her face. "I'll fall asleep with that sort of thing. Why don't we play cards?"

"That's a wonderful idea, Ellie," Leo proclaimed. "What do you say, Your Grace? I know that you are a man of cards."

Tabitha noticed the warning glance her mother shot in the duke's direction, but her father point-blank ignored it, choosing to smack his hands together instead and rub them.

"Then a game of cards is on the table," the duke responded with much excitement. "Why don't you get the table, Lord Bazeley? I'll get the cards."

Tabitha was promptly ignored as Leo fetched the table and set it. The only two people who didn't take part was Tabitha and her mother, as neither of them particularly liked playing them.

“Why don’t you play for us, dear?” her mother suggested. “I think I would like something soothing while we sit here.”

Fortunately, the pianoforte was just behind Tabitha. She nodded and limped to the instrument, opening it before running her fingers along the keys. Tabitha’s mother had asked for something soothing, so she thought about it for a moment and played something from memory. She still kept an eye on the card game being played, noting that her father did not appear to have a good hand. Perhaps he would win the next one.

Tabitha looked away for a moment, watching her fingers glide across the keys before giving her attention to the game once more. From the way Ellie and Leo were carrying on, Tabitha knew they had won again. What was wrong with her father? He was usually good with cards. Another six games were played, eight in total, and her father had lost every one of them but was calling for a rematch. Tabitha’s fingers faltered on the keys, almost coming to a complete stop as horrible realisation dawned on her. She stood up quickly, knocking the stool over and alarming everyone.

“What is wrong with you, Tabitha?” her father snapped.

Tabitha couldn’t tell if he was snapping at her because she had disturbed him or because he was losing. She decided to go with the latter.

Tabitha didn’t speak as she shook her head and ran from the room, ignoring how her knee protested the movement. She just wanted to get out of the suffocating place and into her room.

“Tabitha!” her father bellowed.

But she ignored him. Why should she listen to him when it seemed as though he was the reason behind her current situation?

Climbing the stairs proved to be more difficult, but Tabitha pushed herself, refusing to give anyone the opportunity to stop her. Finally, she reached her room, pulling the door open and shutting it with a loud bang. Tears were already falling down her face by the time Tabitha dropped onto her bed, and she gathered a pillow to her. How could her father have done this to her?

Tabitha squeezed her eyes tight when the door opened, knowing that it was her mother.

“Tabitha?” she called.

Tabitha ignored her and continued to cry. Her bed dipped as her mother took a seat and touched her thigh.

“You will have to speak to me, dear,” her mother urged. “Your father was not impressed by the way you ran out of the room.”

He wasn’t impressed? How did he think she felt? Suddenly angry, Tabitha sat up in bed, roughly wiping her face with the back of her hand.

“Papa has no right to be unimpressed with me,” Tabitha claimed.

“Please tell me something, Mama, and tell me the truth: am I being married off to that scoundrel to pay off Papa’s debt?”

The duchess hung her head and said nothing. That was proof enough to tell Tabitha she was right, but she still needed to hear it.

“Mama, I need to know. Did Papa give me to Leo to pay off a debt he made through gambling?”

“I’m so sorry, dear,” her mother apologised. “I am so sorry. I told your father to stop gambling, but he refused to listen. He has gambled away our estate, and now Lord Bazeley is the only way to get the money we need. You are our only choice.”

Tabitha felt sick to her stomach. “Would you please leave my room? I need some time to myself.”

Her mother never argued but got up and left, closing the door softly behind her. Tabitha threw herself onto her pillow and wept bitter tears. How could her father have done this to her? Was that all she meant to him? A bargaining tool?

The door opened again, and Tabitha yelled at her mother to leave her alone, but it was Mandee’s voice she heard instead.

“It’s only me,” the woman said. “I’m so sorry, Tabitha.”

Tabitha felt her friend come to lie beside her, putting her arms around

her waist. Tabitha turned to her, burying her face in Mandee's neck.

"He is just using me, Mandee," she blubbered. "He made the debt; now he expects to use me to pay it off. What kind of father does that?"

"A desperate one. Perhaps he doesn't know that the marquess is a terrible person and believes you'll be well taken care of."

Tabitha shook her head. "How can anyone be that blind? Just look at his sister! What sort of lady is that? And Leo says nothing to her! Yet he talks to me as though I am a thing to be shaped and moulded. My father heard all this and said nothing. Does he have any idea how I feel?"

Mandee stroked Tabitha's hair, speaking soothing words into her ear, but it did nothing to alleviate the betrayal and pain Tabitha felt. Her father had crossed the line, and she didn't know if she could ever forgive him.

Mandee was so sorry that Tabitha had found out the truth, but it was better sooner than later. However, she didn't like seeing her best friend so distraught. Something had to be done, but what? Mandee's mind turned to Jeremy. How she loved that man, yet he hardly acknowledged her presence.

All the steward could see was a friendly woman. Could Jeremy do something to help Tabitha? Mandee didn't want to push them together because she had a feeling that Jeremy cared for Tabitha a great deal more than he would ever say, but she also loved Tabitha and wanted

her to be helped. Perhaps she should ask Jeremy to do something. If not Jeremy, there had to be someone else to save Tabitha; there just had to be.

Chapter 10

All Jeremy could think about was Lord Bazeley being in the same house as Tabitha. He hadn't been able to sleep, and when he eventually decided to drag himself out of bed this morning, he had wanted to fall right back into it when he remembered who was in the main house. Jeremy was only torturing himself by dwelling on thoughts about Lord Bazeley and how dangerous he was, but there was nothing he could do beyond what he had done so far.

When would his associates get back to him? Jeremy knew it took time to look for information and evidence, but his heart wasn't patient. It wanted justice now, it wanted a way to get Tabitha out of the marquess's clutches, but it had to wait.

Massaging the top of his head, Jeremy decided some breakfast would do his body good. It had been brought to him earlier, but he hadn't been able to eat it. Now, all he wanted to do was eat. He was near the little parlour where it had been set up when he heard a knock on the front door. Jeremy hoped it wasn't the duke coming to demand why he wasn't there to meet the marquess because he might say something that he'd later regret. Fortunately, Mandee was the one on the other side of the door.

"Good morning, Mandee. You're a little early today."

"May I come in?" she asked. "I need to speak with you."

Usually, the woman would greet him first and find out how he was, but today was different. Looking closely, Jeremy noticed lines of strain around the young woman's mouth and tired eyes. Had she not slept as

well? It seemed he wasn't the only one to toss and turn last night.

"Of course," he answered. "Come in."

Jeremy stepped back, letting Mandee come through. She immediately went to his office, surprising him. Not asking any questions, he followed her and found her sitting with her hands folded on her lap.

"Why so stern today, Mandee?" he asked, taking a seat. "Is something wrong? Well, besides knowing who is in the house right now."

"I think you know what the problem is, but what you don't understand is that Tabitha is in danger."

Jeremy received a shocking sensation, as though his body had been snatched from a pit of sharp stakes at the very last minute.

"Has something happened?"

"It's what will happen," said Mandee. "Lord Bazeley is an evil man, and his supposed sister is no better. Tabitha now knows that her father was the one who put the estate in such great debt, and her marriage to Lord Bazeley is a way to pay off that debt, so he doesn't lose the estate."

Jeremy stilled. He had hoped Tabitha would never find out about that, but perhaps it was better that she did. It was better to know what one was working against than walking into something blind.

“How did she find out?”

“Her father was gambling again last night, and even though he was losing every game, he wanted to continue playing. Tabitha may be naïve, but she is intelligent. She put two and two together, and her mother confirmed it.”

Grimacing, Jeremy rubbed the back of his neck. “That was no way for a daughter to find out about her father’s gambling vice.”

“I agree, but that was only half the problem.”

There was more? “What else happened?”

Anger lit up the woman’s eyes, and she straightened her back. “The marquess spoke about training Tabitha to be a dutiful wife. He didn’t seem concerned that her knee was injured, only that she wasn’t around when he arrived. What does that sound like to you?”

Jeremy closed his eyes. He didn’t want to think about it, but he had to. Lord Bazeley was charming on the outside, but it was evident to all who truly knew him that he had a cold heart. If he was talking about training Tabitha, he was up to no good. Tabitha was not an animal to be trained but a woman to be loved. There was no telling how she would be treated once she became Lord Bazeley’s wife.

“Poor Tabitha,” he murmured.

“Precisely!” Mandee exclaimed. “You have to help her, Jeremy. I cannot think of anyone else who can.”

Jeremy shook his head. “I’m afraid I cannot do anything. This matter is beyond me.”

He didn’t want to mention that he was doing something in case the information leaked somehow and Storping or the marquess got news of it. It all had to be kept hush-hush.

Mandee’s mouth dropped as she stared at him in shock. “What do you mean you cannot do anything? Why? Tabitha is in real danger! Why won’t you help her?”

“Interfering will do her no good,” Jeremy explained weakly. “Besides, the duke has sent me veiled threats about my reputation as a steward. He plans to ruin me if I step a foot out of what I’m allowed.”

Mandee shook her head slowly. “I cannot believe I am hearing you say this. Tabitha is in danger, and all you can think about is your reputation.”

That wasn’t it at all. Jeremy would gladly lose his reputation if that guaranteed Tabitha’s freedom, but it wouldn’t. He would rather be here to watch over her than be sent far away.

“You misunderstand me, Mandee. I am worried about Tabitha, more

than you'll ever know, but doing something to anger the duke will not work in anyone's favour."

"So Tabitha will just have to marry the marquess, and that is that?"

The woman was making him sound like some sort of villain. "Of course not, but what can I do? I am just the steward here. I don't have limitless power to do whatever I please."

"But you have more authority than anyone else here," Mandee countered. "Surely you can do something?"

Sighing, Jeremy rested his elbows on his desk and rubbed his eyes. Mandee was making it difficult to say no. What did she expect him to do? Work miracles? The duke had already warned him that he would be the one to blame if something went wrong. Jeremy could only imagine what Storping would say about him to other people. The man could destroy his entire career with just a few right words spoken in the right ear.

"What would you like me to do, Mandee?" he asked. "Why don't you tell me what you expect me to do."

The woman's face fell. "I don't know. I just know that something must be done. Those people are terrible human beings and don't deserve to be anywhere near Tabitha. Lady Whittier already seems to have something against Tabitha. I watched her interact with Tabitha and the looks she gave her when Tabitha wasn't looking. Something isn't right, Jeremy. I don't know what it is, but something isn't right."

Jeremy's resolve was crumbling, and it was crumbling fast. What could the marquess's sister have against Tabitha? The women had never met each other until yesterday, so there couldn't possibly be any history between them. Did the woman not like Tabitha marrying her brother? Why? Jeremy felt like he could ask questions until kingdom come and not get any answers. There were simply too many unknowns in this situation.

"I cannot help you," Jeremy said more firmly than he felt. "I don't have the means to help Tabitha, Mandee. You need to understand that. I am flattered that you came to me and assumed I would be able to, and believe me when I say that I do care about what happens to Tabitha, but there is absolutely nothing I can do."

To his horror, Mandee burst out crying. The woman quickly covered her face and tried to stop any sound from escaping her lips, but her shoulders continued to shake. Jeremy felt terrible. He had caused Mandee's tears, although he genuinely had not meant to do so.

"Please, don't cry, Mandee," he begged. "I don't like seeing women cry."

That only seemed to make the woman howl a little louder. "I can't help it! What am I supposed to do now?" she blubbered. "You were my only hope. I don't know who else to turn to. What am I going to do?"

Overwhelmed by Mandee's emotions, Jeremy left his seat and sat on the edge of the desk, patting the woman's shoulder.

"Everything will be fine," he said, not knowing what else to say. "You just have to believe."

“Believe in what?” Mandee asked, lifting her tear-stained face. “All I know is that the woman I consider my sister will marry a horrible man and live a horrid life. She doesn’t deserve that, but the duke is too selfish to see that!”

That brought on a fresh wave of tears until Jeremy moved to grasp both Mandee’s shoulders and bring her to her feet. The woman kept her eyes down, wiping her nose with her apron. Jeremy tried not to feel queasy at the sight of sticky mucous, and he partially succeeded.

“None of that now, you hear?” he demanded, making sure to avoid the apron. “Tabitha needs us both to remain strong.”

The miserable woman looked up, her face a mass of swollen features and bodily fluids.

“I don’t know if I can be strong, Jeremy. I try to put on a brave face for her, but I’m really worried and scared inside. What will become of her?”

Jeremy thought about embracing the woman to give her some comfort, but he was worried about the snot on her apron. Instead, he kept his hands on her shoulders, lightly patting them as he spoke soothing words.

He heard a knock, but the door opened before he could say anything. Tabitha walked in and froze as she took in the scene before her. Jeremy couldn’t move as well because he didn’t know what to do. Why did he feel so guilty? He wasn’t doing anything wrong, for

heaven's sake!

"Uh, My Lady," he said weakly.

Jeremy felt Mandee still beneath him before she turned around and saw Tabitha.

"I apologise for barging in like this," said Tabitha, backing away. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything."

"You weren't interrupting," Jeremy hastily said. "Mandee is just overcome with some emotions right now."

"Please, excuse me, Jeremy," Mandee mumbled, rushing out.

The woman never stopped to talk to Tabitha, leaving her bewildered. At least, that was how Tabitha looked to him.

"Did I do something wrong?" Tabitha asked.

"No, not at all. I think Mandee is embarrassed that you saw her in such a state."

Tabitha's delicate brow creased into pretty furrows. "But I've seen her cry before."

Jeremy shrugged. What else could he say? Jeremy doubted that Mandee would want him to talk about what they had discussed together.

“Perhaps you should ask her later. Is there anything I can do for you?”

It was rare for Tabitha to come and see him. The last time had been for her to shout and yell about how he had ruined her life, but now that was sorted, he had no clue what she could wish to see him about.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, there is. I need to talk to you about a private matter.”

Jeremy thought about offering her a seat as he would with Mandee, but Tabitha wasn’t a servant, was she? She was the daughter of a duke and a lady. Having her sit alone with him in the office might be innocent to her, but it was a disaster waiting to happen. Jeremy did not want to be the man to ruin her reputation just by being in the same room as her.

“Why don’t we take a walk, and you can tell me all about it?” he asked.

“Wouldn’t you rather stay here? I do not wish to inconvenience you.”

“To tell the truth, I do not want to give people something to talk about. People have a nasty habit of looking at an innocent interaction and turning it into something more ... sordid.”

Jeremy felt his cheeks grow hot as Tabitha's cheeks pinkened. "I see. Perhaps a walk is better."

He was glad that she understood what he was saying. Spelling it out for her would have only brought more embarrassment.

"We can walk along the drive and tell people we are going the same way," Jeremy suggested. "I do wish to go to the main house and ask Cook about her orange cake and cream topping."

Tabitha grimaced. "Orange cake? I prefer lemon cake but with a drizzle and not a cream topping."

"You can keep your lemon cake, and I'll keep my orange cake," he said with a laugh. "Shall we?"

Jeremy moved to the door, opening it a little more widely. Tabitha thanked him as she walked past, giving Jeremy a hint of her floral perfume. He had detected three fragrances on Tabitha, one that she regularly wore and the others when it was either too hot or too cold. All of them suited her and always made him sniff the air around her. Jeremy had never met another woman who smelt as good as she did.

They took their time getting onto the path as they talked about little things. Jeremy could tell there was a lot on Tabitha's mind, but she didn't seem ready to say anything just yet. He hoped she would before they got to the end of the path and branched off.

“Did I ever tell you that I love what you have done to Grandmother’s house?” she said.

“No, you haven’t. Thank you.”

“There is no reason to thank me,” she insisted. “I always thought the house had a lot of potential, but my grandmother was set in her ways. If she liked things a certain way, then they would stay that way.”

Jeremy already knew that. He had to clean a lot of rubbish from the house before he could begin the renovation. The old woman had kept everything and refused to throw anything away even if it was old and falling apart. Jeremy often wondered if it was because those items held sentimental value or if she just couldn’t throw anything away.

“I tried to keep to the house’s original design as much as possible, but I did change some of the rooms to resemble what I liked. Swapping the two windows in my study with one bigger one was the best idea I ever made. I can see so much more through it.”

“Doesn’t it scare you?” Tabitha asked. “I would feel like I’m on display with such a large window in front of me.”

“You might actually like it. It gives you the feeling of being outside without actually being there. That works well for rainy and stormy days.”

Tabitha’s eyes lit up. “I can imagine how wonderful that must look. Sometimes, I love staring at the flashes of lightning. Did you know

there are different colours to them? I've seen blue, purple, yellow, and white. My grandmother used to say that purple lightning was always tied to witchcraft, so I would immediately imagine witches with their large cauldrons conjuring lightning from their murky depths. Foolish, isn't it?"

Tabitha looked up at him, smiling. Jeremy could hardly get a breath out, let alone answer her!

"Yes," he said a tad more harshly than he wanted. "I mean no! It's not foolish. What if witches are the ones making purple lightning? I once heard a story of a man who could control lightning and would send it to people's pockets. He would burn the pocket, but not the coat or apron."

Tabitha's eyes widened in awe. "Is that even possible?"

"My great grandmother seemed to think so. She was Irish and had many stories like that to tell. I used to believe them as a child, but now I suppose I'm past that. None of it makes logical sense."

"Does everything have to make logical sense to be real?" Tabitha asked quietly.

Jeremy stopped walking for a moment as he pondered the question. His heart made no logical sense in carrying a light for Tabitha, but his love for her was real. That was answer enough, wasn't it?

"No, it doesn't," he said and began walking again.

Tabitha seemed happy with that response, even skipping a little and pointing out birds and butterflies to him. Jeremy could see the main house loom ahead and realised Tabitha still had not told him what she had wished to speak to him about.

“You have yet to tell me what’s truly on your mind, My Lady,” he reminded her.

When Tabitha’s face fell, Jeremy wished he had said nothing. She had been happy and carefree seconds ago, but he had dragged her back to reality.

“Yes, that’s true. I have a favour to ask of you, Mr Gibbs.”

“Ask away.”

“I need you to help me find a way out of this marriage.”

Tabitha had said it so quickly that Jeremy almost didn’t catch her words. However, they were loud and clear.

“You wish me to help you?”

“Yes. You said that I should come to you if I ever need help. Did you not mean it?”

She was correct; he had said that. “I meant it, but I’m just surprised that you did come to me.”

“If you would rather I not continue with this conversation–”

“No, no, please continue. I do want to help you, My Lady. You only caught me off-guard.”

Tabitha still looked uncertain, but at least she spoke. “I cannot marry Lord Bazeley,” she said. “I detest the man and dislike his sister. There is something about them that doesn’t sit right with me. I know about Leo, but his sister seems odd.”

Mandee had said the same thing. “What do you mean by odd?”

“She clearly does not like me, and I have no notion why. I only met her yesterday.”

Jeremy instinctively knew it had something to do with Lord Bazeley. “Have you spoken to your parents about this?”

“I cannot because Papa refuses to listen to me. He is only concerned about paying off his debt. Everything I have ever said to him has fallen on deaf ears.”

Jeremy had expected no less, but it still surprised him that a man who

used to dote on his daughter would turn on her all in the name of money. It was unnatural.

“I’m sorry, My Lady. If I could convince your father otherwise, I would, but he is less likely to listen to me.”

“I know that; that is why I have come up with another plan.”

“Another plan?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said a little sheepishly. “Hurting myself didn’t get me anywhere, so I had to think of something else.”

When did she hurt herself? Her knee! “You shouldn’t do anything to hurt yourself, My Lady. It’s not right.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Mandee gave me a mouthful of reprimands. Fortunately, this plan does not involve hurting myself. I want to run away.”

Had he heard that right? “Excuse me?”

“You heard me right the first time, Mr Gibbs. I wish to run away.”

That’s what Jeremy thought he had heard.

Chapter 11

Tabitha could tell she had shocked Jeremy. The man hadn't said a word in a full minute, and for a moment, she considered telling him it was all a joke, but Tabitha didn't want to back down. She had come this far; she might as well go through with it.

"I know that this sounds ridiculous, but I have thought carefully about it," she went on to say. "Running away is my only option right now."

She watched him cup the back of his neck, a habit of his whenever he was stressed. Tabitha did not want to put anyone under the hatches, but Jeremy was indeed her only hope left. She couldn't think of anyone else who could help her.

"Do you know what you're saying?" he asked. "Running away is not to be taken lightly."

"Do you not think I know that? It's all I ever think about lately! I've been reduced to a desperate woman, Mr Gibbs, and who better than you to guide me? You know the world far better than I ever could in my lifetime. I would ask someone else if there were someone else to ask, but there isn't. You are my only option and hope."

Tabitha looked up at him with her big blue eyes, hoping Jeremy would take pity on her. Perhaps this was a crazy idea, but that meant it was also crazy enough to work.

"My Lady," he started and just sighed, seemingly at a loss for words.

“Please, Mr Gibbs. Please save me.”

“I’m sinking fast,” she heard him mutter under his breath.

Did that mean she was wearing him down? “I have always dreamt about running away, you know.”

Jeremy’s eyes widened and narrowed in disbelief. “Why?”

“I know it sounds foolish of me when I have had the best of everything, but having everything does not necessarily make one happy. My life has been filled with things, but it has been a lonely existence. I’m grateful that Mandee has been with me for some years, but I was largely alone before. I had no one to talk to, confide in, and console me when I was upset. My parents did the best they could by buying me everything a girl could ever need, but I used to envy those who had many siblings. I liked seeing the cheerful chaos of a big family. I once asked my mother if she would please give me a baby brother or sister, but she told me that wasn’t possible. I used to think you could just go to a store and buy a sibling – like you would buy most things. I sound so foolish admitting this to you.”

“I ... I didn’t know any of this,” Jeremy admitted.

“Why would you? I portrayed the life of the girl who had everything, which I did if you looked at it from a materialistic perspective. I just didn’t have a companion. Then Mandee came into my life, and we became friends. She would not be happy to know that I wish to run away. She’ll probably try to stop me.”

Mandee was always trying to protect Tabitha from the world, but now Tabitha needed to run into that very world to save herself. It was the only way.

“So, you have not spoken to Mandee about this yet?” Jeremy asked. “You came straight to me?”

“Yes, because I believe that you can help me. Poor Mandee wishes to help me, but her hands are just as tied. I know that I sound selfish wanting to run away, but I’m not doing it to hurt anyone. It’s not even about the fact that I’m not receiving the luxuries I’m used to. None of that matters to me. I’ve been a sheltered woman all my life, you see, and people have kept me from experiencing anything of the world. Unfortunately, their good intentions have also ostracised me from most things.”

If Tabitha had been allowed to experience more of what the world had to offer, she believed she would have dealt with this matter of marriage with Leo. Tabitha would have come to her own rescue.

“They wanted to protect you,” Jeremy unnecessarily explained.

“To what end? I’m engaged to marry a ruthless man, Mr Gibbs. A man who will mistreat me and make my life miserable. I cannot do a thing for myself because I do not know how to. Everyone else around me has been existing in a world of their own choices, while I have been stuck living a life that others want me to live. I’m going to go from one household of being controlled like a doll to another household where the same thing will happen. That isn’t fair! How would you like it if your freedom was taken from you and you had to live the life that others created for you?”

Jeremy shuffled his feet, moving from foot to foot. He appeared uncomfortable, but at that moment, Tabitha didn't care. She needed him to understand how desperate she felt.

"I wouldn't like it," he finally said. "I value my freedom and would hate to live a life dictated by others."

"Precisely my point!" Tabitha exclaimed. "I need my freedom, Mr Gibbs."

"I understand that, My Lady, I truly do, but do you understand what lies waiting for you outside the gates of this estate? It's not going to be easy."

Jeremy wasn't telling her something she didn't know. "I've already thought about all that."

"Have you?" he asked, his eyebrows rising. "What will you do to earn a living? You have no useful skills other than that of a governess. What will you do to protect yourself? Where will you stay? Do you know how to shop for a household? What about paying rent? Buying your own clothes? You will not have the money to simply buy whatever you want without a thought to the cost of it. Every single penny in your purse will have to be counted; you will have to budget, not just for your daily needs but for emergencies as well. Anything that can go wrong usually does, Lady Browning. Will you be able to handle that?"

Tabitha felt a slight tremble in her knees at everything Jeremy had

said. She had thought about most of the things he had mentioned, but she would be lying if she said she was prepared for the other things. Perhaps living out there in the world wouldn't be easy, but Tabitha knew it would be worth it. All she needed was someone to give her a chance.

"I'm stronger than I look, Mr Gibbs," she insisted. "I may not look it, but I can handle whatever life throws at me. I have the determination and motivation to survive."

Jeremy shook his head. "I'm not sure if you do."

Tabitha's heart fell when he started walking without her. Was he saying no? She caught up to him, grabbing his arm.

"You cannot simply walk away from me without saying anything else, Mr Gibbs. You need to give me a better answer."

Jeremy looked at her hand, and she quickly moved it away. She had never been aggressive with him and had probably crossed the line.

"I apologise," she said, hanging her head. "My desperation seems to have gone to my head."

"Do not apologise, My Lady."

Tabitha lifted her head and was surprised to see understanding in his eyes. "I should go, Mr Gibbs. I think I have bothered you long enough.

Good day."

Tabitha turned to go, pausing when he told her to stop. For what? It was evident that he didn't think her strong enough to handle whatever the world threw at her.

"Why?" she asked. "There is nothing more to say."

"Then let me speak. I have heard you, and although I disagree with this plan, I have decided that I will go with you to protect you."

Tabitha blinked slowly, her mind trying to register what he had said. She had believed he would say the opposite, but now ... A wave of relief crashed over her, buckling her knees. Tabitha felt her legs give out, but Jeremy managed to catch her before she reached the ground. He lowered her onto the grass but didn't immediately let go. Looking into his eyes, Tabitha was alarmed by what she saw. Jeremy's eyes had become dark pools of heat that both thrilled and scared her.

"Mr Gibbs?"

That seemed to bring him out of whatever spell he had been under. Jeremy immediately released her, stepping further away than he needed to. Tabitha felt that he was putting distance between them for his own control. What had happened to him?

"Are you well enough to stand?" he asked after a while.

Tabitha tested her legs, feeling they were strong enough. “Yes, I think so.”

She took Jeremy’s outstretched hand, hardly putting in any effort to pull herself up. Tabitha thanked him as she dusted her dress and looked for any pieces of grass or dirt. She noticed a little smudge of dirt and knew Mandee would want to know what she had been doing.

“You look fine, My Lady,” said Jeremy. “That bit of dirt is hardly anything.”

“That’s what you say, but I know Mandee. She’ll spot this smudge from a mile away.”

Jeremy smiled. “Tell her it was my fault. She can come and scold me instead.”

Tabitha laughed, knowing that her friend would never do that. The woman had a little soft spot for Jeremy and doted on him.

“I can take the reprimand as long as I know you will help me escape this prison. When do you think we can do it?”

Jeremy put a finger to his lips as he looked around. Was there someone nearby? Tabitha couldn’t hear a thing, but to her amazement, one of the gardeners appeared a few steps away from them.

“How did you know he was there?” she whispered. “I didn’t hear him.”

“Good ears,” said Jeremy, tapping them. He raised his hand at the man, greeting him. “How are you, Carlton?”

“Never better, Mr Gibbs,” the man replied. “How are you, My Lady?”

“Very good, thank you. I like what you have done with the hedges.”

The man beamed, touching the hedges with affection. “I also like them, My Lady. I keep them nice and neat, and sometimes I give them a little shape. Do you recall when I made that bush under your window look like a swan?”

Tabitha thought back to that, vaguely recalling something like that. “Yes, I do. It was big and beautiful.”

“I could turn that bush into something special for your wedding, My Lady,” said Carlton. “Would you like that?”

It was on the tip of Tabitha’s tongue to say no because she didn’t want to have anything associated with her wedding, but it wouldn’t be fair to the gardener. Tabitha wasn’t even certain if the man was aware of Lord Bazeley’s reputation.

“That would be lovely, Carlton. Surprise me.”

The man tipped his hat and moved along until they couldn't see him anymore.

"We're going to have to be more careful when we talk about these plans," Jeremy warned. "We do not want anyone overhearing us."

"Yes, you're right. I would hate it if someone told Papa or even Lord Bazeley. They would lock me up and make sure I never saw the light of day."

Tabitha shivered at the thought. She didn't have a doubt in her mind that the men were capable of doing this.

"We'll never discuss it openly," Jeremy assured. "But we must plan to ensure that we are ready for absolutely anything. Perhaps we can meet again on this pathway tomorrow."

"I'd like that." Tabitha looked around them again. "No one is about at the moment; why don't we start a bit of the planning now? I'll feel much better knowing at least a little of what we shall do."

Jeremy scratched his chin, and Tabitha could hear the barest whisper of stubble growing. For just a second, she wondered how it would feel to rub her hand against Jeremy's face. He would probably feel rough, perhaps similar to a cat's tongue. Tabitha had once owned a cat, but it ran away one day and never returned. That was the last time she ever had a pet.

“We will need funds first,” Jeremy started. “Which I will take care of. There is no need to worry about that.”

“But I have a little nip money,” she countered.

“It won’t be enough, My Lady. We need a good sum to support us while we look for a place to stay and work.”

Tabitha thought about all the jewellery she owned. Surely they were enough to fetch a handsome price?

“Papa has bought me many pieces of jewellery over the years. I can sell them and give you the money.”

Jeremy shook his head. “I will not take your money, neither will I allow you to sell your jewellery, My Lady. Those items belong to you. Let me take care of the finances.”

Tabitha felt her lips pout just a tad. “But this is my plan and my decision. Why won’t you let me contribute?”

“Think about it. What will your father say when he finds out that you’ve sold your jewellery? He’ll become suspicious. And where will you sell your jewellery? Everyone knows your father, and someone will say something. No, it’s too risky selling your jewellery.”

Tabitha hated to admit this, but Jeremy was right. Her father would eventually find out that she was up to something and do whatever he

could to find out what it was. Not only would she get into trouble, but Jeremy could be fired for helping her.

"You're right," she conceded. "That is too risky. What about the other aspects of the plan? How much luggage can I carry? Where will we go? What will we do?"

"That will take some time to work out. It will have to be a place where your father would never think to look for us. You would have to change your name, and I would mine. You will not be able to dress as you do now, My Lady. It's too fancy."

Leave all her clothes behind? Tabitha thought about that for a moment. Would she be willing to give up every comfort life had ever given her? She had to think long and hard about that one.

"Should I wear dresses like Mandee's?" she asked. "Maybe I should speak to her about borrowing hers."

"If you would like to include her in the plan."

Did she? Tabitha wasn't entirely certain. She knew that Mandee would immediately reject this idea and call it ludicrous.

I do not want Mandee sabotaging this plan because I cannot stand another minute of this life. Leo is all set to marry me, and Papa cannot help until his debts have been settled.

Tabitha hated to keep anything away from her friend, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Perhaps she would tell Mandee a little later once she had complete assurance that the woman wouldn't somehow reveal the plan.

"I will not tell Mandee just yet, but I will eventually. What else should we discuss? What will we eat? I can go some hours without food, but I do not wish to starve. I suppose the money you will have will be enough to feed us for a while."

Tabitha was saying anything at this point. She was just so excited that she could twirl around and do a little dance right here. Jeremy understood and laughed a warm sound that tickled Tabitha's insides. She had never heard him laugh like this and liked it.

"This is rather exciting," he admitted. "But we must not get ahead of ourselves. I'll do some research on places where we can hide while your father and the marquess look for us, what sort of disguises we should have, who I can rely on to help us, and most importantly, how to safely get you out of the house without anyone noticing that you've left."

The more Tabitha heard Jeremy talk about the plan, the more she realised there was so much more to it. She had only thought about the basics, but he was thinking about everything. It was the very reason why she had asked him to help her. Tabitha had known that Jeremy would have the knowledge to do so.

"I'm willing to go through anything as long as I have my–"

"–freedom!" they finished together and laughed.

Jeremy sobered quickly, a look of concern flitting across his face. “Are you confident this is what you want, My Lady? Once we start, there is no turning back. We will have many consequences to deal with.”

“I know that, but I’m willing to go through them. I have thought about this a lot, you know. This is not the first time that running away has crossed my mind. I started thinking about it when I was about twelve years old. I had just read a novel about a boy who goes on an adventure and becomes a great hero. I wanted to be him, but a female version. I wanted the adventure and to finally be known as a heroine. I do not want to become someone’s little wife and have everything dictated to me.”

Tabitha had not liked the way Leo had referred to her. That alone had spurned her on to really consider running away from home, but she could never do it on her own.

Looking at Jeremy, she could sense his hesitance. He probably thought it was a dangerous and foolish notion to have, and yet he was still willing to help her.

I cannot believe how I once shouted at him and hurled all sorts of accusations at him. I have known Jeremy for many years and have never once heard him do anything wrong. I did not deserve his forgiveness, yet he forgave me anyway. Should I forgive Papa for his weaknesses as well?

The duke was wrong to give her to Lord Bazeley, but was there a chance that he truly thought it was the right thing to do? How did a father go from spoiling his daughter to selling her to a scoundrel?

“What are you thinking about?” Jeremy asked.

“Many things. Why don’t you call me Tabitha?” she said. “I would like to call you Jeremy just as I used to. After all, we are now partners.”

“But that is not proper,” he argued.

“We’re friends, Jeremy. Call me Tabitha, please.”

He nodded. “Very well, Tabitha.”

She beamed up at him and seemed to catch him off-guard. After a moment or two, he seemed to regain his balance and returned her smile. This time it was Tabitha’s turn to feel a tad breathless at the sincerity of his grin. Or was it something else?

“If we had some wine right now, we could have made a toast to our partnership. I wouldn’t drink it as I’m not a fan of wine. I prefer milk.”

Jeremy grimaced, but there was something playful about it. “Milk belongs in tea.”

“That shows how much you know!” she said, chuckling. Tabitha glanced at the house, knowing it was time to head back. “Thank you so much for helping me, Jeremy. I’ll never forget this.”

“There is no need to–”

“–thank you. Yes, I know, but I need to. I think I’ve kept you long enough. Why don’t you return to your house while I go to mine? Mandee must be wondering what’s keeping me. Bye, Jeremy.”

“Goodbye, Tabitha.”

Tabitha offered him another smile and hurried home feeling more elated than she had in a while.

Chapter 12

Usually, Tabitha enjoyed parties. They were an excuse to dress up, try elaborate hairstyles, wear her jewellery, and socialise. However, there was absolutely no way that Tabitha could enjoy the small dinner party her father had planned for later this evening.

"Your mother says you have to wear the green dress with the yellow diamond earrings and pendant," said Mandee, smoothing out the gown. "I agree with her. This lovely shade of green works well with the yellow."

Tabitha was more concerned with how much the yellow diamond jewellery would fetch. It had to be a lot because yellow diamonds were rare from what she had heard. Although Jeremy had told her not to bother about organising the money needed to run away, Tabitha couldn't help looking at the amount of money sitting in her room.

There had to be thousands upon thousands of pounds, from her silk dresses to the animal furs that she didn't like but her father insisted on. There were simply too many things, and most of them would be left behind. Wouldn't it make more sense to sell what she could and give Jeremy the money?

"What is wrong with you these days?" Mandee asked. "You always appear to be miles away."

Tabitha still felt a little guilty for not informing her best friend about the plan, but Mandee appeared too concerned about what the duke or duchess said or did to be trusted with such a large secret. It wasn't that Tabitha didn't trust her friend, but the woman had such a strong

sense of loyalty that she would think telling her parents about the plan would somehow save Tabitha from making the wrong decision.

“Can you blame me? Lord Bazeley is currently living under my roof. Not only do I have to see him every day, but I also have to share meals with him and suffer his stupid remarks about our wedding. If he is not bad enough, then you need not look any further than his sister. Somehow, I still feel that she couldn’t be his sister, but who else would she be? Lord Bazeley cannot walk around with an unmarried woman by his side, especially when everyone knows that he is soon to marry me.”

Talking about it did nothing to lighten her mood. Tabitha had no idea how many people her father had invited, but she thought it would be a small gathering as he couldn’t afford much else. She had a feeling that Leo was not willing to part with any money until Tabitha was officially Lady Bazeley.

“Do not dwell on all of that right now,” Mandee pressed. “This is the first gathering you have been to in months and months, so why not enjoy it for what it is?”

“But it’s to welcome Lord Bazeley to our area. How can I enjoy something like that?”

“Oh, I don’t know!” Mandee snapped. “Do as you please then. You always do.”

Tabitha pulled her head back, alarmed by her friend’s sudden outburst. What had got into her? This was unlike Mandee.

“I’m sorry if I irritated you,” Tabitha apologised. “I do not mean to do that. I’m just having a difficult time coming to terms with everything. One day my life is a certain way, and the next, it’s something else. It’s a challenging time.”

“Oh, I know that,” Mandee said with a sigh and came over to her. “I’m sorry for snapping at you, Tabitha. It’s not really you that I’m angry with, but this entire situation. I don’t want you to be sad every day or scared about what the future will hold.”

Tabitha almost told her that she would receive the freedom she had always wanted very soon, but she kept her mouth shut and just embraced her friend. After a bit of hesitation, Mandee put her arms around Tabitha, holding her close. The two stood like that for some time, both drawing comfort from each other. This was indeed a trying time for everyone, but not as much as Tabitha. She was the only one making sacrifices.

“So, will you wear the attire your mother has picked?” Mandee asked after a while.

“No wonder you always get work done,” Tabitha complained. “You keep at it until you have the outcome you want.”

“’Tis the best way to handle anything. Reinforcement is best.”

“Very well, I shall wear the green dress and yellow jewels, but do not do anything elaborate to my hair. Something simple that will not require much time to undo once I retire for bed. Undoing all those intricate plaits and disentangling hairpins from my hair is not how I prefer to spend my moments before bed.”

“I’ll do what I did when the marquess came to the house. Just a simple plait twisted into an updo. Your mother will expect some sort of pretty hair item, so I think a comb should give enough sparkle to your hair without clashing with the other items.”

Tabitha let Mandee go on about fashion choices and what went with what, knowing that it was the woman’s passion. Tabitha had always hoped to help her friend open her own shop one day, but that didn’t look likely anymore. Mandee would have to set aside money to do that, and even then, it might not be enough to have her own shop. It would be such a waste for her skills to never see the light of day. If Tabitha had had such skills, she was confident she would have found employment anywhere.

Mandee fiddled with Tabitha’s hair for a good twenty minutes, twisting it this way and that.

“Are you going to decide which way to put it up? Papa will not like me being late.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Do not pressure me when I am trying to make a good first impression.”

“For who?” Tabitha asked.

“I know that you do not see yourself as an engaged woman, but others do. I wish to show the world that you are a beautiful woman and worthy of anyone’s attention.”

“Have I ever had a problem with that?”

Mandee tapped Tabitha’s head with the back of the brush. “Stop exasperating me and let me do as I wish. You are the only person I get to practice my skills on, and this gathering is the perfect way to show what I am capable of.”

To what end? Did Mandee have a desire to leave the estate someday? Tabitha would not begrudge her such a dream.

When she was ready, Tabitha went downstairs and joined the guests in the drawing-room. The duke made a fuss as soon as Tabitha appeared, calling her to him.

“Ah! Here is my daughter at last. Is she not beautiful?”

Most of the guests already knew who she was, which only made Tabitha feel awkward as she stood there on display.

“I believe I should be doing that, Your Grace,” said Leo appearing on Tabitha’s other side. “She will be my wife after all.”

Tabitha couldn’t help cringing at the marquess’s words. How had she ever found the man charming? She must have been both desperate and nervous about making a good impression at the ball that any sort of male attention had been painted with a heavy brush of fiction.

“Right you are, Bazeley!” the duke exclaimed rather loudly.

Had her father been drinking? He seemed a little too boisterous to be sober. Tabitha snuck a glance at him and noticed a slight pink tinge to her father’s cheeks. The man had most certainly been drinking, but he was only tipsy at this stage. She shuddered to think what he would do once he was completely drunk.

“Why don’t you sit with me, my dear?” said Leo, already tugging on her arm.

Tabitha wished to tell him where to put his demand, but she went along with him for the sake of not drawing attention. She inwardly groaned when she realised that she would be sitting with a group that included Ellie. Why did Leo insist on throwing them together when it was evident that his sister did not like her? Perhaps the man was an imbecile.

“Gentlemen, I’m sure you all know my fiancée?” said Leo.

The men in the group greeted her, and Tabitha responded with politeness in turn. Just because she despised Leo didn’t mean she had to be rude.

“How do you do, Mr Lyttle? How is your wife? I do not see her tonight.”

“She could not come,” the man replied. “She is heavily pregnant with

child at the moment."

"I see. Congratulations."

"Not just yet," said Mr Lyttle. "I don't know if it's a boy or girl. If it's another girl, I'll be ruined."

"Are daughters such a burden to you?" she asked.

"They are when you have no sons to inherit, and your land will fall into the hands of a cousin I hardly know."

"Is there some sort of clause stipulating that a daughter cannot inherit your property, Mr Lyttle? Are you not in charge of your own land?"

Mr Lyttle's face changed as he turned to Leo. "Your fiancée has a loose tongue, Bazeley. Best you learn how to break her in early."

"Do not worry about that, Mr Lyttle," Leo answered. "I shall take care of Tabitha, and you take care of your wife."

Take care of her? Goodness! How she was excited to be leaving this place and this man. Tabitha knew it was just a matter of days before she and Jeremy would leave this land and she could finally gain her freedom. Lord Bazeley and her father would come looking for her, but Jeremy would know how to handle that.

Another man joined their group, sitting down near Ellie. Tabitha barely took notice of him until he suddenly started coughing. At first, she thought he possibly had something in his mouth, but he appeared to be looking at Ellie while trying to catch his breath. The man's face was a deep red by the time he was done with his violent coughs, but he still kept staring at Ellie. Did they know each other?

"Ellie Whittier," Tabitha heard the man say.

"Mr Clyde," Ellie returned, moving her chair closer to the man.

So they did know each other! Tabitha didn't know why this was significant, but she found herself listening to the pair's conversation intently. She had no idea what she expected to hear, but perhaps they would be more interesting than talk about politics.

"I never thought I'd find you here," the man said, sounding surprised.

"I'm here on business," Ellie replied.

Since when was her brother getting married 'business'? Tabitha found that a strange way of putting it.

"The last I saw of you was when you were in that gaming parlour fleecing people for all their worth. How is that going?"

A gaming parlour? Ellie had worked at a gaming parlour? No wonder

she seemed so abrasive and unladylike. Why would Leo's sister work there when he had so much money? Unless the gaming parlour belonged to Leo and Ellie was merely taking care of it.

"It has been a little sad without you there, Mr Clyde," said Ellie. "I enjoyed prying your money from your fingers."

Mr Clyde had been a former customer at the gaming parlour; that much was clear. What sort of people had her father brought into their home? It took a moment for Tabitha to realise they were her father's type of people. He was also a gambler and had probably frequented the same types of gaming parlours as Mr Clyde had.

It left her with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Tabitha found that she no longer wished to be part of this gathering anymore or anywhere near these people. She stood up, quickly stepping away when Leo put his hand out to her.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To my room. I do not feel well this evening."

Leo snorted. "That is a lie, and you know it."

"You can think all you want, Leo, but I am going to my room. The atmosphere in this room is nauseating."

Leo looked stunned as he pulled his head back and stared at her with

wide eyes. This was the first time she had ever seen him at a loss for words. Tabitha felt some satisfaction in knowing that she had managed that. She walked away, only noticing that Leo was following her when she left the drawing-room. Tabitha rounded on him, ready to give him a piece of her mind.

"Come back to the room, Tabitha," Leo demanded. "Everyone will begin to wonder where my fiancée is."

Tabitha snorted. "Do you think that I care what they think? Let them know that I have run out on you before we are even married. Let this be a sign of what is to come."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Only that I will never marry a man like you. You are a despicable creature, and your sister is no better. I cannot believe I ever thought you were charming."

Leo laughed, shrugging his shoulders. "I do not deny who I am, but you are wrong about one thing, my dear wife-to-be. You will marry me, and there is nothing you can do about it. I am a man accustomed to getting my way, you see, and you are the key to what I want. I will not allow some spoilt little girl to keep me from what I deserve to have."

Tabitha didn't know what Leo was about at this point, but she knew that she would burst out crying and be humiliated if she didn't leave.

She turned on her heel and fled, running so fast that her knee sent out

little twinges of pain. It hadn't healed completely yet, but Tabitha barely noticed it during the day. Now, it was protesting the pace she had set for herself, not happy to stop until she had reached her door and shut out the man behind her.

Reaching her door was taking far longer than usual, but when Tabitha finally did, she sagged with relief and all but fell through the doorway.

"Tabitha!" Mandee cried.

Tabitha had forgotten that Mandee had promised to stay in the room until she got back. She was so relieved someone would be with her that she started weeping, falling into her friend's arms.

"What on earth happened?" Mandee asked. "Speak to me, Tabitha."

"One moment," she gasped.

Why was she even crying? Perhaps Tabitha was still too much of a sheltered child to take on the evils of the world, and Leo knew that. He had probably counted on her innocence to get his way. If Jeremy didn't finalise their plan soon, Tabitha was afraid Leo would win.

It took a moment or two, but she was able to calm herself down to an occasional hiccup. Why had she allowed Leo to see her weak and distressed?

“Will you tell me what happened?” Mandee insisted. “I have no fingernails left to bite while I wait.”

They both settled on the bed before Tabitha told her about what had transpired in the drawing-room. Tabitha thought Mandee would be surprised by it all, but the woman only nodded in understanding.

“I expected as much,” the woman admitted. “The woman seems rough and mean as though she deals with similar characters all day. She reminds me of a serving woman in a tavern or brothel house.”

Tabitha coloured when Mandee mentioned the brothel house. She had only recently learnt what that was, and by mistake as well. The next time she would not be so nosey and listen to servants’ gossip.

“She isn’t much of a lady,” Tabitha commented. “I do not understand how she can be Leo’s half-sister. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Stranger things have happened, I suppose,” said Mandee. “Perhaps Leo’s mother was a lady, but Ellie’s mother was a wench. It happens.”

It still seemed odd to Tabitha, but she nodded. “I suppose so.”

“Does your father suspect anything suspicious? I know that he was taken aback by Ellie’s behaviour the other day.”

Tabitha laughed miserably. “Leo is a manipulative piece of work. I have no doubt that he wangled his way out of any suspicions with a

few of his stories. My father is under his spell just as much as I feel helpless. Leo must feel he is on top of the world."

"Do not give him the satisfaction of thinking he will have a docile wife just by scaring you," Mandee advised. "Men like him love power and quickly lose their control when they feel they no longer have it. If you show Lord Bazeley that you are not afraid of him, he will think twice about trying to mould you into whatever he has in his mind."

But Tabitha didn't want him to get that far. "You speak as though I am going to marry him. Have you lost all hope already?"

"That is not what I meant."

Tabitha frowned at the quilt on her bed, running her hands along the lace pattern. That had indeed sounded like what Mandee had implied. Did her own friend think that she would not escape Leo's clutches?

"Tabitha, that is not what I meant," Mandee said again. "I can see what you're thinking, and you're wrong. Lord Bazeley still has to be dealt with while we figure out a way to save you from him. That is why I suggested you show him you will not submit to him. It might deter him or even make him postpone the wedding."

Tabitha doubted that would work. Although she had explained what had happened downstairs, there was no way Tabitha could describe the feeling Leo had given her. Tabitha had felt trapped and suffocated, which had distressed her to the point of unwelcome tears. She had had a taste of what awaited her in the future if she didn't get away from Leo.

“Nothing will deter him because he knows that he’ll be able to force me to do anything once I marry him,” Tabitha explained. “My only option is to somehow stop the wedding, run away, or get Papa to see Leo for who the man really is.”

Tabitha waited to see if Mandee would say anything about the running way part, but her mind seemed occupied with something else.

“I’ve asked some friends for help,” she said. “They know Lord Bazeley’s world better than we ever could. Perhaps they’ll find some information on him.”

“Perhaps Jeremy will be able to help me as well,” Tabitha said carefully. “He is an intelligent man and might have a way to get me out of this marriage.”

“Did you speak to him about it?”

“A little. I really admire his patience and ability to listen to a person.”

Mandee said nothing. Didn’t she agree? She knew Jeremy just as well as Tabitha did, if not more. The woman seemed to be acting a little odd, so Tabitha decided to keep any other comments on Jeremy or information about the plan to herself.

“I should go to bed,” said Mandee, sliding off the bed.

Usually, the woman would stay to help her undress, but she was ready to go. Tabitha was puzzled about her friend's behaviour. Had she said something wrong?

"Good night, Mandee," Tabitha eventually said. "Oh, and would you let the housekeeper know that I need to speak to her in the morning? She is always running around on errands, and I can hardly catch her."

"I'll do that. Good night."

Tabitha waited for the soft click of her door before taking her evening attire off and replacing it with a nightdress. Tomorrow was a big day for her, and she wanted to be wide awake and bushy-tailed for it.

"You will not win, Leo," Tabitha whispered as she settled into her bed.

Jeremy wouldn't let him.

Chapter 13

Tabitha bent backwards, wishing her hair were loose so it could fly through the air as she swung on her swing. Unless she took out the pins that Mandee had used to keep the hairstyle in check, it was going to remain unmoved. How did the woman manage to do that? Tabitha could shake all she wanted to, but the hair would stay in place save for a few wisps of hair. The curls framing her face didn't count.

Kicking back up, Tabitha considered taking off her shoes and feeling the grass with her bare feet. Someone had filled in the groove her feet had dug and put a patch of grass over it, saving her shoes. Scuffing the front of her shoes just seemed foolish when Tabitha knew her father's money woes. Why ruin them and be forced to buy a new pair?

As it was, she needed all the nip money she had left and then some to run away from home. Jeremy had promised to take care of it, but Tabitha couldn't leave the subject alone. She could help; she knew she could help. Maybe Jeremy would think differently if Tabitha showed him proof of her ability to help.

Pushing away from the ground, Tabitha gave herself up to enjoying the air whipping past her body but was careful not to have her dress fly with it. It would do her no good to have her undergarments displayed and earn a sound scolding from her mother. It was bad enough that her parents were not impressed with her attitude towards the marquess. Tabitha felt her mood dip just thinking about the man.

"No," she told herself. "I refuse to let him take away my joy today. I'm going to escape, and that's all that matters."

It had been a while since she had felt any hope, and Tabitha wanted to hold onto it for as long as she could. Tabitha still felt some fear that the escape plan would be discovered, and she would be barred from leaving the house, but that was normal. Every risk carried hope and fear, but the trick was to have the hope outweigh the fear.

She paused when she heard the rhythmic thud of hooves hitting the earth. Tabitha didn't bother looking, assuming it to be one of the workers, and continued to swing with her head back. That feeling of rushing through the air and suddenly dipping was a heady one and sometimes made Tabitha feel like she was made of liquid. When the horse drew closer, Tabitha was forced to stop and stare at its rider.

"Jeremy!" she exclaimed.

Why did she react like that? Tabitha had sounded a little too happy to see the man. Perhaps it was pure excitement.

"Good day, My Lady," he said, smiling.

"Good day," Tabitha replied, glad that her voice sounded normal. "Are you doing your afternoon rounds?"

"Not just yet. I have a few more errands to complete, and then I'll start my rounds." Jeremy briefly looked around them and dipped his voice. "How are you?"

"Interested in knowing how the plan is coming along," she admitted. "It's all I ever think about."

Jeremy nodded and slid off his horse. He didn't come too close but encouraged his horse to eat some grass. He kept his head bent as though talking to the horse, but Tabitha knew his attention was on her.

"Everything is coming along well," Jeremy said. "A little slower than I expected, but I would rather it be slow and precise than rush everything and leave gaps."

"Progress is progress. Have you found anyone willing to help us?"

"I've sent two letters to my good, trusted friends and expect to hear from them within the next three days. They live in the first two towns we'll stay in until we reach our destination."

Hearing about the details of their escape was making everything seem more real to Tabitha. She didn't know whether to be excited or apprehensive. So many things could go wrong, but she knew that Jeremy wouldn't allow them to. The steward was meticulous about everything he did.

"What is our final destination?" she asked.

"I haven't decided yet, mainly because we have to change our identities. I want to ensure that no one can possibly know either of us."

That made sense. "I haven't seen a lot of England, so I should be safe,"

Tabitha told him. “People know my father, but they do not know me as much. Have you travelled much?”

“Here and there, but not extensively. I’m avoiding the towns that have more than a handful of people who know me. Fortunately, England has many towns and villages to disappear into. There are also Wales, Scotland, and Ireland to consider.”

Tabitha’s eyes widened. “That far? I have never stepped outside of England.”

“If it’s our last resort, My Lady. I want to keep you safe and will use whatever means necessary.”

The thought of being so far away from home filled Tabitha with some trepidation, but wasn’t that the point? To remain at home meant to live in danger, but to leave, no matter how far, promised freedom. It wasn’t just her who was in danger, but Jeremy. He was putting his life on the line to save her.

“I know you will never let anything bad happen to me, Jeremy,” she told him with a smile. “I trust you.”

“That means much to me, My Lady,” he replied, his expression pleased. “You seem to be in higher spirits today if you do not mind me saying so.”

“Not at all because you’re right. I’m happy knowing that Lord Bazeley will never succeed in his plans, and I will not have to live a life of servitude to the man. That is enough to keep me cheerful!”

Jeremy chuckled, stroking his horse's bulging cheeks. "Hearing the happiness in your voice makes it all worthwhile, My Lady."

He looked away for a moment, but when he turned his eyes back to her, they held something that Tabitha didn't understand, but it was enough to make her draw in a sharp breath. Was it longing? For what? Tabitha's naïve mind tried to make sense of it, and she would have asked if not for the realisation that quickly dawned on her.

Jeremy was looking at her as though he ... Tabitha couldn't complete the thought. Her cheeks burned with colour as she dipped her head, wishing her hair would hide her face.

"I must go, My Lady," said Jeremy.

Tabitha jerked her head up. "Already?" she asked in dismay.

Jeremy smiled at her, making her bite her lower lip and focus on her dangling feet. Why had she sounded so disappointed?

"A steward's work is never done," he answered. "But I'll find another time to discuss our plans again."

Only when Tabitha heard Jeremy swing onto his horse did she look up, hoping her cheeks were not too pink.

“Thank you, Jeremy,” she said, her voice oddly soft.

“No, thank you for trusting me, My Lady. That means a lot to me.”

He gave a shallow bow and urged his horse onwards into a light trot. Part of Tabitha hoped he would look back and was somewhat disappointed when he didn’t. What was wrong with her? Tabitha continued to stare after him until Jeremy disappeared from sight.

Only then did she leave the swing and make her way back to the house, her mind weighing on her thoughts and actions. She didn’t quite understand what was going on, but something had shifted between her and Jeremy. The most peculiar part was she didn’t mind it at all.

Tabitha felt a little self-conscious as she weaved her way through the crowd, keeping close to Mrs Cummings. The housekeeper knew the market area better than Tabitha did and had promised to help Tabitha sell a few of her things. It had taken some courage to approach the housekeeper and ask for her help since Tabitha was not confident of the woman’s ability to keep her confidence on the matter, but Mrs Cummings had seemed eager to help.

Tabitha had come up with a story about wanting to have her own money and not depending on her father for nip money, especially with their current financial difficulties. It hadn’t been a lie, not really, but Tabitha hadn’t told the whole truth either. Her mother would call her reluctance to speak the whole truth a sin of omission, but her parents didn’t have a leg to stand on, did they? They had lied to her and

forced her into a corner. Well, Tabitha had found a little hole to escape through and was making good use of it.

“How much further, Mrs Cummings?”

“The fellow is just around this corner, My Lady,” the woman replied. “There isn’t much further to go.”

Tabitha nodded, briefly laying her hand on her belly. Her insides felt knotted and made her seem a little out of breath, but she knew she would feel better once she met the trader and sold the items she carried in her bag.

“Are you certain he will not tell Papa about this?” Tabitha asked for the umpteenth time.

“Mr Reynolds is sympathetic towards women who cannot have their own money, My Lady,” the housekeeper answered without looking at her. She sounded a tad annoyed. “He is discreet and will not give away the details of his suppliers. You have my word on that.”

Mrs Cummings had said as much the first ten times that Tabitha had asked, but she couldn’t resist hearing the housekeeper’s reassuring words once more.

“We’re here,” the woman suddenly said.

The man’s stall was tucked behind a shop that sold watches and clocks

and wasn't immediately visible to anyone walking past the shop. One would have to know it well to find it.

"Good day, Mr Reynolds," Mrs Cummings greeted pleasantly. "I've brought you a lady who wishes to sell some things. I'm sure you'll be interested in them."

The man had large, pale blue eyes set in a bony face that seemed too long in the jaw. Everything about him appeared long, from the length of his hair to the shoes he wore. Dirty shoes, she might add.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss ...?" the man greeted.

"No need for names," the housekeeper hastily interrupted. "Show him the merchandise, My Lady."

Tabitha nodded, her hand trembling ever so slightly as she placed her bag on the man's stall and took out the items she had chosen to sell. She counted three shawls, eight ribbons, one brooch, a few rosettes she had yet to glue onto her shoes, two silk handkerchiefs, a pearl hand comb, a brush and three scarves. Tabitha had only picked the items she seldom used or wore to avoid having her mother detect that anything was missing.

The man immediately went for the brooch, holding it up to the light and using a magnifying glass to look at the precious stones that studded the item. It was one of Tabitha's least favourite brooches and was therefore easy to part with.

"I'll give you ..." the man paused, tapping the main stone in the centre

before giving a price.

Mrs Cummings immediately protested. “Absolutely not! This is good quality, Mr Reynolds. If you do not give us a fair price, then we shall go elsewhere.”

Tabitha wanted to tell the housekeeper that any amount was acceptable, but the woman held her wrist as though to say ‘keep quiet’. Mrs Cummings was obviously in her element, so Tabitha took her unspoken advice and let her haggle with prices. Eventually, an acceptable amount was reached for the other items as well, and Tabitha was handed a heavy sack of coins. Pride filled her as she weighed the sack in her hand. It felt rather weighty and promising.

“Thank you, Mr Reynolds,” the housekeeper said graciously. “Until next time.”

As soon as they were some steps away, Tabitha drew out a coin and pressed it into Mrs Cummings’s hand.

“Thank you for helping me,” said Tabitha. “I could not have done this without your guidance.”

The housekeeper looked at the coin for a moment before tucking it into her apron with a grin.

“The pleasure is all mine, My Lady. You just let me know if you have anything else to sell, and I’ll take you.”

Tabitha thanked her again and climbed into their carriage, barely able to contain her excitement. She couldn't wait to tell Jeremy what she had done.

Some Days Later

Tabitha hated having breakfast with Ellie. The woman was loud and brash and had absolutely no table manners. It took everything within her not to snap at the woman, so Tabitha tended to ignore or avoid her as much as she could. Fortunately, Tabitha was too happy to allow Ellie to annoy her too much today. Everything was going well – what was there to be unhappy about?

Taking a bite of her toast, Tabitha nearly choked when she heard her mother speak to Ellie.

"That is a beautiful brooch, Lady Whittier," the duchess said. "It looks just like the one Tabitha has."

"Indeed?" the woman replied. "I bought this at the market yesterday for a steal of a price. Where did you buy Tabby's brooch?"

"From a well-known jewellery maker in London," Tabitha's mother said with some pride in her voice. "Tabitha's brooch was supposed to be a one-of-a-kind creation. Her father had it made for her fifteenth birthday. May I see it?"

“Of course,” Ellie replied, unclasping it and handing it to the duchess.

Tabitha could only look on in horror as her mother inspected the brooch, turning it over in her hand a few times before looking up at Tabitha with a heavy frown on her brow.

“This looks like yours, Tabitha. How can that be?”

“Oh, uh ... I gave it to Lady Whittier!” Tabitha said in a rush of words. “Don’t you remember?” she asked the surprised woman. “I actually forgot about that. I gave it to Lady Whittier some days ago.”

“But she said that she bought it,” the duchess argued.

“You simply forgot, didn’t you, Lady Whittier?” Tabitha said, looking at the woman pleadingly.

Ellie frowned at her for just a moment, suspicion clouding her eyes before the look smoothed away with a cold smile. Tabitha didn’t like the look of it.

“Oh, how could I forget? Of course, you gave it to me. How silly of me.”

“Oh, I see,” the duchess said in some confusion as she handed the brooch back to Ellie. “That was ... good of you, Tabitha.”

Tabitha smiled weakly, taking another bite of toast before declaring herself full and leaving the table. She hadn't got far when Ellie called out to her.

"One moment, Tabby!"

Groaning, Tabitha turned to her. "Yes?"

"Why did you lie to your mother?"

"Well, um," Tabitha began, searching her mind for an excuse. "I didn't want Mama to know that I traded it for a purse I really liked."

"Indeed?" the woman asked, clearly not believing her. "Would you please go back to the breakfast room? I must speak to you and your mother about the wedding plans."

"But I have something to do," Tabitha protested.

"I will not be long," the woman insisted. "I just need to fetch some things from my room. I helped you lie to your mother. Surely you can spare me a moment for your own wedding?"

It seemed the woman was blackmailing Tabitha already. "Very well," said Tabitha and returned to the room.

Her mother seemed surprised to see her back, but fortunately, nothing was said about the brooch.

“I’m glad to see that you and Lady Whittier are getting along well, dear,” her mother commented. “I was worried that you would remain stubborn.”

“So did I,” Tabitha replied a little darkly.

“The wedding will be such a grand event! I have already spoken to several dressmakers who all wish to have a hand in your trousseau.”

Tabitha was secretly pleased that she would never get to wear any of the items made for her. She let her mother carry on about the wedding, only catching her breath when Ellie appeared.

“I’m glad you have returned, Lady Whittier,” the duchess said happily. “Tabitha and I were just discussing the wedding. What do you have there?”

Ellie seemed to be carrying several things in her hand, one of which was a shawl Tabitha had sold to Mr Reynolds. Her blood ran cold.

“Just a few things I purchased that I’d like to show you and get your opinion on,” said Ellie with an ugly glint in her eyes. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” the duchess said.

Ellie proceeded to place each object on the table, her eyes never leaving Tabitha’s. By the time she was done, Tabitha had counted four items that had belonged to her. Her gaze slid to her mother, who appeared to be confused as her eyes fell on each item. The duchess finally looked up and gave Tabitha a hard stare.

“What is going on here, Tabitha?”

Chapter 14

Tabitha thought about barricading her room, but that wouldn't make any difference because her mother would find a way to get in. It wouldn't make sense in general because barring entrance into her room meant no water, food, or freedom to move around.

"I would have made me my own prisoner," she said solemnly to herself.

Tabitha had had no words to give her mother when the duchess demanded to know why she had sold so many of her things. Her excuse of 'because they are mine' had not gone down well with her mother.

Sighing, Tabitha sat with her chin in her hands as she stared miserably at the door. She knew her mother would make an entrance any moment now and do what her eyes had promised. Tabitha was surprised the woman hadn't come in yet, but she was well aware that it was only a matter of time before her door was pushed open and her mother came marching in. There was no possibility of the duchess letting this matter go, not when she believed she had been embarrassed in front of a guest. The woman had probably informed Tabitha's father by now, which meant double the trouble for Tabitha. How was she going to get out of this mess now?

Ellie had looked on smugly, evidently pleased with the commotion she had caused. How had the woman come to buy so many of Tabitha's belongings? It just seemed odd and too much of a coincidence to readily accept.

“’Tis almost as if she wished to get me into trouble,” Tabitha said thoughtfully.

Unfortunately, Tabitha had no way of knowing if Ellie had deployed nefarious means to get her into trouble. What else could she do but let the matter go? For now, anyway.

Tabitha lifted her head when she heard hurried footsteps nearing her door. There was more than one pair, but they were both too light to believe them to be anything but women. Her mother had likely brought one of the servants to help search her room.

“Oh, no,” Tabitha groaned.

Her room was going to be turned upside down, wasn’t it? Tabitha had a split second to decide whether she should chance to lock her door, but she decided against it. Her actions would only aggravate the situation, so Tabitha sat as calmly as she could and waited for her mother to barge in. The duchess didn’t bother knocking but pushed the door open with more force than was necessary, her face full of determination.

Tabitha winced when the door banged on the wall, almost smiling when it nearly knocked into the women standing with their hands on their hips. The duchess had chosen Mrs Cummings to help her search, which was rather ironic because the housekeeper had been the one to help Tabitha sell her belongings. Would the woman help her to protect her own involvement in the matter, or would she throw Tabitha to the wolves and pretend to know nothing about it?

“Mrs Cummings, you start on that side, and I’ll start here,” the duchess ordered.

“What are you doing, Mama?” Tabitha asked unnecessarily.

“Do not speak to me, young lady,” her mother snapped. “You know precisely why I’m here. It is only through good manners that I did not scold you in front of Lady Whittier.”

The duchess turned away and started digging through a chest of drawers. Tabitha had taken the handkerchiefs from one of the drawers, but she didn’t think her mother would notice anything. How could she when Tabitha had so many of them? She had sold her rarely used and least favourite items in return for some money. Didn’t people usually do that?

“What else did you sell?” her mother demanded to know. “I need to know right now.”

“Not much,” Tabitha answered vaguely. “Only the items I do not like.”

“Who gave you the right to sell them?”

“Those items were given to me, Mama. I believed I had every right to sell them.”

The duchess pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. She seemed to be counting quietly to herself and probably wondering what she had done to deserve a daughter like Tabitha.

I find that somewhat amusing, given that I have always been a respectful and obedient daughter. I have never felt the need to rebel until now. I hope my parents remember that as they try to justify their behaviour towards me.

Mrs Cummings appeared to be searching half-heartedly, probably realising that she could be in as much trouble as Tabitha was. Thank goodness the housekeeper had not taken the telltale route.

“Where is the money?” the duchess asked.

A sudden surge of fear left Tabitha’s body tingling. Even Mrs Cummings paused but didn’t look up.

“What money, Mama?”

“Do not act the fool, Tabitha. Unless you think I am a fool?”

“Not at all, Mama,” said Tabitha with all the innocence she could muster. “What money do you speak of?”

“The money you received for the belongings you sold. Where is it?”

“Why do you want it?”

“Because it does not belong to you.”

Tabitha’s mouth dropped open. “How? I sold items that belonged to me! That money is mine.”

“Why do you need the money?” her mother asked.

“I would think that much is obvious. Papa has all but put us in the poorhouse, and I thought it would make sense to acquire my own nip money. Surely, that isn’t wrong?”

The duchess shook her head, folding her arms below her bosom. “Our family’s financial situation is none of your concern, Tabitha.”

Tabitha could feel the first ropes of anger grab hold of her flesh and tighten around her. Not her concern? Had they forgotten why she was marrying the marquess?

“I am being forced to marry Lord Bazeley because Papa is in debt. How are our financial problems not my concern?”

“Because I said so,” her father said, strolling into the room. “You forget yourself, Tabitha. You are my daughter, and you are under my protection and rule. You do as I say in all things. You do not get to make decisions here. Now, I suggest you hand the money over to your mother, and we’ll forget about this little matter.”

Tabitha stared at her parents, wondering what she had done to deserve any of this. Why couldn't they let her keep the money? Did they know something she didn't?

"Well?" her mother pressed.

"I don't know where I put it," said Tabitha with defiance.

For a moment, her parents looked at each other before turning to the housekeeper, who looked like she was still searching, but Tabitha knew otherwise. The woman was probably trying to find the best way out of the situation. To make matters worse, Tabitha's sack of money was buried under the scarves that lay beside the housekeeper. Mrs Cummings only had to move her search a little to the right, and she would find it.

Why didn't I pick a better place to hide it?

When Tabitha's gaze returned to her parents, she noticed the attentive look on her father's face. His eyes flickered to the scarves and back to Tabitha before a smile spread across his face.

"Mrs Cummings," he began. "Would you look between the scarves? I think you'll find my wayward daughter's money there."

Tabitha wanted to cry out to stop them from doing so, but she was outnumbered and the most petite person in the room. What could she have done? All Tabitha could do was look on as the housekeeper's callused hands plunged her hands into the scarves and pulled out a discoloured sack that made clinking sounds as the coins danced over

each other.

“Bring it here, Mrs Cummings,” the duke ordered.

“But it’s mine, Papa!” Tabitha argued. “It’s my nip money, so I didn’t have to bother you. Why are you taking it?”

The duke waited for the sack to hit his outstretched palm before shaking his head at Tabitha.

“Why do you need it, my dear? You’re going to marry a wealthy man soon, and he has kindly offered to provide you with whatever you need for the wedding. There is no need for this,” he said, holding the sack up by its drawstring. “If you would excuse me?”

How could she lose the money she needed to give to Jeremy? Tabitha leapt off her bed and ran after her father.

“Give it back, Papa,” she begged. “Please. Let me have it.”

“Nonsense,” her father replied. “You do not need it. Now, I do not wish to hear anything else about it, you hear? And do not sell any more of your things. I’ve asked all the servants to keep a close eye on you. If they fail to inform me of any of your tricks again, I’ll fire them. That’s a good enough incentive to do as I wish.”

The duchess and Mrs Cummings followed the duke as they left her room and didn’t bother to close the door behind them. Tabitha

thought about banging the door shut, but what good would that do? Instead, she got under the bedcovers and wept.

Several hours later, Mandee called her downstairs to have tea with her parents, Lord Bazeley and Ellie. Tabitha didn't want to, but Mandee made it seem as though she didn't have an option.

"Why do they need to see me?" Tabitha asked. "To humiliate me further?"

"I do not know, but I don't want you to anger them. Please, Tabitha. Just come down and have tea."

"Fine, but I am not changing out of my clothing. They will have to accept me as I am."

Mandee looked at Tabitha's crumpled dress and messy hair. "Surely, you do not think your mother will accept this?"

"They took my money, Mandee. What else can they do? Let Lord Bazeley see me at my worst. Perhaps he'll decide that he does not want me after all."

Mandee gave an exasperated sigh. "Fine! Do what you will, but do not complain when your parents scold you."

Tabitha didn't care and said as much. Mandee appeared to be at her wits' end when she left the room, closely followed by Tabitha. Neither

woman said a word even when they separated, and Tabitha went into the drawing room. There, she found her father and Leo playing a round of cards. To her horror, her sack sat in the middle of the table as though waiting to be won. Had her father lost his mind? The estate was already in financial ruin! Why could he not learn his lesson?

Leo spread his cards on the table and grinned. “I believe I have won yet again, Your Grace. That charming little bag of money is mine.”

Tabitha felt sick to her stomach. Lord Bazeley was taking everything away from her and slowly choking her chances. Horror clawed at her throat, forcing little cries from her that threatened to grow louder. Although Tabitha knew that Jeremy was doing all he could to help her, her fear was growing the longer she sat in the marquess’s presence. She wiped away the perspiration on her upper lip and dabbed her temples with the back of her hand, her eyes darting to the door.

“You look a little off colour, dear,” her mother commented. “Is everything all right with you?”

“She does look a little ill, Your Grace,” Ellie said, her expression none-too-kind. “What is the matter, dear Tabby? Perhaps your fiancé might have the words to comfort you.”

Ellie was taunting her; that much was obvious. The woman turned to her brother as if to call him, making Tabitha jump to her feet.

“Please, excuse me,” she cried, inching her way to the door.

“Where are you going, Tabitha?” her mother asked.

“I, um ...” Tabitha trailed, coughing a little to clear her throat. “I need some fresh air.”

“Now?” her mother asked, unimpressed. “What about Lord Bazeley?”

Tabitha wanted to shout, ‘what about him?’ but wisely kept quiet and maintained her slow progression to the door. She felt rather than heard Leo turn towards her before she looked at him. The man watched her with some amusement; his one eyebrow cocked upwards.

He said nothing when Tabitha reached the door, only gazing at her as though he hadn’t a care in the world what she did. The marquess was evidently so sure of himself and their upcoming wedding that he didn’t care what Tabitha did. That thought alone was enough to urge her out of the door, running towards the garden.

Tabitha leaned her head on the thick rope as she gently swung herself back and forth. Fortunately, no one was around to witness her misery or ask her questions about her state. She was free to weep, albeit in silence, while thinking about how unfair her life had become.

Everything had seemingly spiralled out of control overnight, but the ball of ruin had started rolling the moment her father had put his gambling vice above the needs of his family. Did every gambler think they could win? It was only a fool who believed that a higher bet would somehow increase their chances of winning.

Tabitha stilled when she heard a horse's hooves coming her way, instantly hiding her face away. Enough hair had slipped out of her topknot to cover half of her face while the other half remained turned away.

"My Lady?" she heard Jeremy say. "Are you unwell?"

She could not let Jeremy see the state she was in! "I'm fine, Jeremy. You can be on your way."

Instead of the horse continuing, Tabitha heard Jeremy jump down from his horse and approach her. Stubborn man!

"What happened?" he asked.

Tabitha dried her eyes with the back of her hands and slowly faced him, hoping she didn't look as terrible as she felt.

"You've been crying!" he said, alarmed. He took a step towards her, holding his hand out for a moment before dropping it to his side with a frown. "What has happened? Was it that scoundrel again?"

Tabitha shook her head. "It wasn't him this time. I suppose it's my fault, although my parents are not far behind."

“Why?”

Tabitha proceeded to tell him about the belongings she had sold and her parents’ reaction, leaving nothing out. Jeremy listened in silence, his face giving nothing away. She felt strangely exhausted and relieved when she finished her tale, waiting for Jeremy to say something. He surprised her by walking away, and she would have called out to him had he not stopped at the horse’s hind leg. Was he really so upset? Everyone was already angry with her; Tabitha couldn’t take it if Jeremy were also mad.

“I thought I could help,” she explained in a small voice.

Jeremy turned to her, clearly upset. “Why? I have asked you to be patient, My Lady. I have savings tucked away. You needn’t have sold your things and brought about your parents’ attention.”

“How can I be patient when I live in a state of dread?” Tabitha cried, getting off the swing. “I keep waiting for Lord Bazeley to do something or for my father to suddenly announce that the wedding has been moved to an earlier date. It’s all becoming too much, Jeremy.”

Jeremy quickly came towards her, standing far closer than usual. Tabitha didn’t feel alarmed at all and actually welcomed his nearness.

“I understand that this is a weary burden to carry, but I am here to help you,” he said soothingly. “I have promised to help you escape, and that is precisely what I will do. You do not have to go through this alone, My Lady. Please, just trust me.”

Tabitha sighed, looking down. “I know all this, Jeremy. I suppose that makes me a weak person for overreacting.”

“Not at all,” he denied. “We’re dealing with a challenging situation, one that you have to overcome. How can I think you’re weak?”

Tabitha wiped the tears that continued to fall, inwardly cursing herself for crying. She was so tired of it and wondered when her body would dry up. She closed her eyes for a moment, sucking in her breath and letting it out slowly. When she opened them and looked up at Jeremy, she saw only tenderness in his eyes. If he believed she could overcome her situation, then she would believe it as well.

“I will not marry that rake,” she declared. “We have come too far to allow that to happen.”

“And you won’t,” Jeremy assured. “You have a strong will, my lady. That alone is a force to be reckoned with. And no one with a heart as pure as yours should be forced to be with a man like Lord Bazeley. We will win this together.”

Jeremy’s words washed away Tabitha’s worries, giving her the strength to believe in the best outcome. Gazing into his eyes, she felt a little nudging in her heart that gently pushed her to really take a good look at the man before her.

While Jeremy wasn’t of her class and didn’t hold a title, he was the loveliest gentleman she had ever known. It took but a second more before something clicked in her head, making a hidden truth abundantly clear to her. She was falling for him.

Chapter 15

The very next day, Tabitha found herself looking for Jeremy soon after breakfast. The meal had been tolerable despite the company because her mind hadn't been on Ellie or Lord Bazeley. Instead, she had been thinking about Jeremy.

Yesterday, speaking to him had set her mind at ease, but it was her heart that felt unsettled. She had oddly felt better once she started to think about Jeremy, which led her to wonder just how much she cared for him.

Tabitha found him speaking with the butler, who bowed and left as she approached them.

"Good day, Jeremy," she greeted cheerfully.

"Good day, My Lady," he said, bowing slightly. "I am glad to see you smiling today."

Tabitha felt her cheeks grow slightly warm. "It's a beautiful day, and I have a favour to ask of you."

"Oh? You need only say it, and I'll do it."

"You do not know what I'm going to ask," she teased. "I could ask you to give me your kidney for all you know."

“If that is what My Lady wishes,” Jeremy replied without hesitation. He sounded as though he meant it.

“Fortunately, it’s nothing as drastic as that. Mama has permitted me to turn the conservatory into a luscious floral house, but I do not know the first thing about arranging flowers, what tools I’ll need, which flowers to have ... I have absolutely no knowledge of any of this, although I do love flowers. I’m more of an admirer than someone who actively takes an interest in such things.”

Tabitha had spoken to her mother at the breakfast table that morning and gained her permission to take over the room. The duchess seemed more than willing, perhaps thinking it would keep Tabitha out of trouble. If only the woman knew it was just an excuse.

“Ah, I see. You wish me to help you plan it?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes, please. From beginning to end.”

Jeremy flashed the smile that Tabitha had come to rely on seeing every day. It instantly brightened her day.

“My mother loved flowers and has a conservatory of her own. I often spent time with her and helped her look after her plants. I’m sure I’ll be able to help you as well.”

A tiny frown appeared between Tabitha’s forehead as she considered

something she had never thought about before. She had never asked about Jeremy's family. The man had worked on the estate for seven years, yet she barely knew anything about his personal life. What kind of a person was she?

"What is wrong, My Lady?" Jeremy enquired.

"I do not think I am a good person. In fact, I know it."

"Why would you say such a thing?"

"How long have you been with my family, Jeremy?" she asked him.

"Seven, going on eight years, My Lady."

"Precisely. You know so much about my family and me, but I do not know much about yours. What kind of person does that make me?"

Jeremy tilted his head, smiling. "Why would you need to ask about my family? I am here to serve you and your family, not talk about mine."

Tabitha shook her head. "You do not understand. You're risking your life for me, and I do not even know much about your life. What really are you risking, Jeremy? Do you have a family that depends on your salary? Will they be affected once people find out what we've done?"

The more Tabitha asked questions, the worse she felt about the situation. Goodness, but she had been thinking so selfishly all this time! Assuming she was the only one who stood to lose much was one of the most foolish things to have ever crossed her mind.

“Do not fret, My Lady,” Jeremy urged. “I am not doing anything that I do not wish to do. My family understands that I am a man of honour and will only do what is necessary. It is not for you to worry about me.”

“How can you say that? Are you not a person like me? Once you remove our class difference, you will find that nothing separates us. We’re just the same.”

As soon as she had said that, Tabitha realised just how true her words were. What was the only dividing line between her and Jeremy but the fact she was born a duke’s daughter? Jeremy had proven himself to be better than the titled people she knew, and yet he was considered a secondary citizen because he lacked a title. It was ludicrous!

“That difference is not a line, but an ocean, My Lady. I taste the truth in your words, but I beg you not to repeat them again. People do not take kindly to such words and will consider it a revolt. People have died for less.”

“Sometimes a revolt is needed,” Tabitha insisted.

“But let it be elsewhere,” Jeremy said gently. “We have enough worries of our own without bringing the nation into it. Shall I meet you in an hour?

Tabitha wished to argue the point further but saw no purpose in it. Jeremy preferred to hold on to their old ways rather than consider something that would make them equal. It disappointed her more than Tabitha thought was necessary.

“Yes. An hour is fine.”

She turned away, uttering a little gasp when Jeremy touched her arm with the tips of his fingers. He quickly snatched his hand away, staring at her in horror.

“F-forgive me, My Lady,” he stuttered. “Forgive me, please. I overstepped.”

Tabitha longed to smooth her hand over the tingling area but didn’t want Jeremy to feel any worse.

“’Tis nothing, Jeremy. Did you want to say something?”

His brow puckered as he looked away. “I … I do not know. I think I should leave. Please excuse me, My Lady.”

Jeremy took off before Tabitha could say anything else. What on earth had got into him? He wasn’t one to overstep himself or take advantage of a woman, so why did he seem so horrified?

“He probably wanted to gain my attention and touched me without thinking about it,” she told herself.

That was no reason to overreact, but perhaps it was for him. Hopefully, this silly moment wouldn’t impact their time in the conservatory. Tabitha wanted to find out how their plan was going and hoped Jeremy had an update. She knew that it had only been a day since they last spoke, but she had been reduced to needing an update every day. Also, it wouldn’t hurt to spend a little time with Jeremy.

He always managed to set her mind at ease and give her hope. Who would not want a person like that around them?

Tabitha returned to the house to search for Mandee. She would need someone in the conservatory with her to maintain propriety, but Tabitha hoped the woman wouldn’t get too involved. The plan was still between her and Jeremy as she wasn’t confident about how Mandee would react to it. Tabitha knew the woman wanted the best for her, but sometimes they had different ideas about what was best.

Tabitha found the woman sorting out gowns, her look of concentration almost silencing Tabitha’s footsteps into the room. Mandee only turned when Tabitha was nearly upon her, jumping back with a gasp.

“Tabitha!”

Grinning, Tabitha threw herself on her bed, ignoring the gowns. “What on earth are you doing?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Mandee returned. “Get off those gowns before you wrinkle them.”

“Why are you fiddling with them?”

“Your mother asked me to go through them and note any missing ones. I heard what you did, and I disapprove. You’re digging yourself a hole.”

Mandee really did not look impressed. Tabitha sat up and crossed her legs, pushing the gowns away from her.

“Are you angry with me?”

“What do you think? You seem to be keeping far too many secrets from me, Tabitha. How am I supposed to help you if you won’t tell me anything?”

When Tabitha realised her friend was more hurt than angry, she slid off the bed to embrace Mandee.

“I’m sorry, Mandee. I didn’t mean to keep things from you. I just thought that the fewer people that know about it, the better.”

Mandee pulled away and busied herself with returning the gowns. “I’m not just people, or does our friendship mean nothing to you?”

“Of course, it does. Look at it as my way of protecting you. You could honestly say that you had nothing to do with it.”

“I’m not the one who needs protection,” Mandee insisted, sighing as she put down the dress she was holding. “I’m worried about you, Tabitha. Don’t you understand? I feel that you’re making everything much worse.”

Tabitha wanted to tell the woman that there was nothing to worry about, but Mandee would want to know why she had such confidence.

“I feel there is still hope, so don’t despair. Your frown will curdle all the milk in the house.”

Mandee shook her head. “Still jesting at such a time. What am I going to do with you?”

“Sit with me in the conservatory while Jeremy teaches me about the flowers and plants I should have? I asked him to give me advice on how I should transform the conservatory into something that looks like paradise.”

Interest sparked in the woman’s eyes. “Oh? When?”

“Less than an hour. Take a book with you because I might take a while discussing plans with him.”

Except the plans had nothing to do with the conservatory.

“Very well. Allow me to return these gowns, and I’ll ask Mrs Cummings to organise a pot of tea.”

“Good idea!” Tabitha exclaimed. “I’ll help you.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” said Mandee, pulling the dresses away from her. “You’ll only make a mess. Why don’t I meet you in the conservatory? That should give you time to look over the room before Jeremy arrives.”

Tabitha nodded, laughing. “An even better idea. I’ll see you soon.”

Tabitha all but skipped as she left the room, cheerfully greeting all the servants who passed her. Leo stopped her as he came out of the drawing-room, but not even he could dampen her spirits.

“How are you, Tabitha?” he asked.

“Well, thank you. Would you please excuse me?”

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?” the marquess said, ignoring her request.

“The conservatory. I plan to plant a few flowers and plants.”

The marquess smiled. “Already practising to be a good wife, ey?”

Tabitha’s smile died. “I do not have time for small talk, Leo. Please, excuse me?”

She didn’t wait for his answer this time but walked away from him, aware of his eyes boring into her back. What was he thinking? He was a fool if he believed that everything revolved around marrying him. Tabitha could just imagine the surprise on his face the day she finally escaped. Tabitha was going to enjoy thwarting his plans.

A little later, Jeremy and Tabitha stood off to one corner over a dying plant as they discussed her escape route. Her eyes kept darting to Mandee, hoping that the woman couldn’t hear anything being said. The woman appeared engrossed in her book, but Tabitha knew her friend could pretend to do one thing while doing another.

“The kitchen will be the safest place,” said Jeremy under his voice. “We will meet there.”

“Are you certain no one will see us?”

“How can they when it’s supposed to be shut for the night? Once the

scullery maids finish the dinner dishes, you'll be able to sneak down and wait for me."

This sounded so risky to Tabitha's ears, but she believed Jeremy. If he said it would work, then it would.

"How will we leave the property?" she asked.

"There will be a carriage waiting outside the kitchen door. A good friend of mine is a carriage driver and knows our first destination."

"He won't say a word, will he?" said Tabitha.

Jeremy shook his head. "Magnus is a trustworthy man. I've never had cause to doubt him."

Tabitha nodded, taking a deep breath. "Very well. I'm just a little nervous about everything. So much can go wrong."

"But nothing will," Jeremy assured her. "If we stick to the plan, everything will go well. Trust me."

"I do, I do." Tabitha took on a deep breath and released it slowly. "I better return to Mandee before she becomes too curious and makes her way over here."

The woman was already darting looks their way but trying not to make it look too obvious. Tabitha touched the plant in front of her, pretending to ask a question about it.

“What are you doing?” Jeremy asked, confused about her miming.

“Follow my lead.”

“Why not just ask me out loud? I do know a thing or two about plants.”

Tabitha laughed, nodding. “Yes, how silly of me. Is this a perennial plant? If not, will it survive any season if I keep it in the conservatory?”

Jeremy answered her question as they walked towards Mandee, who never looked up from her book until Tabitha called to her. Mandee looked up as though surprised and mentioned something about getting ready for dinner. Tabitha considered skipping dinner and spending the rest of her evening talking to Jeremy, but that wouldn’t go down well with her parents.

“Please let me know if you have any more questions, My Lady,” said Jeremy. “I will be in my office for most of the day tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Jeremy. I’ll do just that. Shall we go, Mandee?”

They walked away from him, but Tabitha turned as they got to the

door and sent a dazzling smile his way. Jeremy looked surprised for a moment, but he returned it soon after. It was a smile that spoke volumes, promising the freedom that Tabitha so desperately wanted. Now, it was simply a matter of days.

Tabitha stared at her potatoes later that evening, regretting the amount of gravy she had put on them. She didn't usually add so much, but her mind was elsewhere tonight. Shrugging her shoulders, she scooped some of the gloopy brown liquid to the side and cut into a soggy roasted potato.

"May I please have your attention," said Leo.

Tabitha rolled her eyes and continued to eat until she felt everyone's eyes on her. Pursing her lips slightly, she put down her utensils and folded her hands on her lap. Why did everyone have to stop eating just because the marquess had something to say? It was ridiculous.

"Go ahead, Leo," the duke encouraged. "Say what you must."

"Thank you, Your Grace. I wish to announce that I shall be returning to London soon."

Tabitha sucked in her breath and blinked hard. Did this mean the wedding would be postponed? Possibly cancelled? She could only hope.

“What do you mean?” her father asked. “Why the sudden change in plans? What about the wedding?”

“Rest assured that I have taken that into consideration, Your Grace,” said Leo. “The wedding will be sooner than planned.”

Tabitha felt her heart drop. This was much worse than she thought. What had made the marquess change his mind? Had Mandee overheard something and informed the marquess?

No, that’s impossible. I know that Mandee doesn’t know a thing about the escape. Something else must have happened.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that the wedding will still take place, but what is the hurry?” the duke enquired. “Are you not enjoying yourself here?”

“To be frank, Your Grace, I am rather bored in the countryside. The London scene is more to my tastes.”

Tabitha had not wanted to sit next to Ellie during dinner, but now she was glad she did, or she would have missed what the woman had to say.

“More so that the duke is broke,” Ellie snickered under her breath. “Storping has gambled everything away.”

Tabitha inwardly groaned. Her father had once again put her in a difficult position.

Chapter 16

Pacing her room like a raving lunatic was not doing Tabitha any good. She needed to get a letter to Jeremy but had no idea how to. What was she going to do? Leaving her bedroom at this time of the night would raise questions, especially with Jeremy's house being her destination.

"How else am I supposed to tell him about Leo's decision?" she said under her breath.

Jeremy needed to know because it impacted the night their plan would be put into action. If Tabitha didn't leave soon, all their careful planning would amount to nothing. She would become the Marchioness of Bazeley, and then there would be nothing that anyone could do about it.

Tabitha paused, putting a hand on her bed as her chest squeezed. She couldn't marry Leo! That was a life sentence of misery just waiting to happen. Who would save her then? Leo would have every legal right over her and never let her forget it.

"I'll be forced to deal with Leo and his horrible sister," Tabitha cried. "How could this have happened?"

Tabitha had heard what Ellie had to say on the matter, but could Leo really be leaving because the duke had no more money to bet? The marquess had come to marry her, not gamble, or was Tabitha wrong about that? Not for the first time, she wondered if someone had overheard her conversations with Jeremy and taken the news back to Leo. Mandee had been the only one close enough to hear anything,

but Tabitha wouldn't believe that her own friend would betray her like this.

The very same woman stepped into the room, her smile faltering when she saw Tabitha's expression.

"What is it, Tabitha?" Mandee asked. "Why do you look so hopeless?"

"Did you do it?" Tabitha asked, her voice cracking.

"Do what?"

"Did you tell Leo about my escape plans? You were the only one who could have heard me discuss them with Jeremy."

Mandee looked sincerely confused. "Why on earth would I tell that man anything? And what do you mean by escape plan? What have you and Jeremy cooked up?"

Tabitha's shoulders slumped forward. She had been right about Mandee, but that still left a significant gap in the story. What was going on?

"Oh, Mandee. I feel that everything is falling apart! Leo wants to get married sooner."

“What?” the woman said, drawing Tabitha to the bed. “This is all so confusing, Tabby. Just tell me from the beginning because I do not understand anything.”

Tabitha hung her head. She had to confess everything because Mandee was her only way to contact Jeremy. She still didn’t know if she was doing the right thing, but what choice did she have? Tabitha was stuck between a hornet nest and a pit of snakes. Several stings could hurt her, but it would only take one bite from the snake to snuff out her life.

“I wanted to tell you about this from the very beginning, but I was afraid to have anyone else involved.”

“With what?” Mandee pressed.

Tabitha told her friend everything, keeping her eyes on the woman’s face. Surprise and dismay registered on Mandee’s face, but nothing to show that she could have betrayed Tabitha. Mandee eventually looked away, but not before Tabitha saw a sheen of tears in her eyes.

“Why are you crying?” she asked.

“It’s silly of me,” Mandee replied. “Do not pay me any mind.”

“But you’re my friend. I want to know what is wrong.”

Mandee turned to look at her, her cheeks slightly dampened with

tears. “I know that you are not aware of this, but I feel that I must confess it to you.”

Confess? Did Mandee have something to do with the marquess moving the wedding date? No, it couldn’t be.

“What do you wish to confess?”

“I’m in love with Jeremy.”

Stunned, Tabitha could only stare. This had been the last thing she expected her friend to say, but now that Mandee had said it, Tabitha couldn’t pretend that she hadn’t heard it.

“I ... I didn’t know,” Tabitha finally said. “I didn’t have a clue about how you felt about him, Mandee. I’m so sorry.”

“No,” the woman argued. “There’s nothing to feel sorry about. I realised that I didn’t have a chance because Jeremy loves another.”

He did? Tabitha felt a pinching sensation near her heart. She shifted, hoping to dislodge her discomfort. What did it matter to her that Jeremy was in love?

“Oh, indeed? Do you know who she is?”

Mandee chuckled. “It’s you, silly. Jeremy loves you, and I suspect he has been in love with you for many years.”

Tabitha drew back from the woman, waiting for Mandee to say that it was all a joke, but she seemed serious.

“I think you’ve misjudged him, Mandee. Jeremy cannot love me.”

“Why? I’ve seen how comfortable you are with each other. Jeremy sets you at ease faster than anyone else I know, and you talk so easily to him. Sometimes, I watch the way he looks at you, and I see the love shining in his eyes. The sun rises and sets on your head, Tabitha. Jeremy has never looked at anyone else like that, and I can only hope that I’ll find someone who will love me as much as he loves you.”

This was confusing. Tabitha had never seen the signs, and Jeremy had never done anything to show that he loved her. Could Mandee be wrong?

She has to be. Why would Jeremy love me? Yes, he is kind and noble, and it’s true that I feel at ease around him, but that’s hardly grounds for love, is it?

“I don’t really understand what you’re saying, Mandee, but I believe that you think so. However, I cannot worry about that now. What will I do about Lord Bazeley? He is determined to make me his wife before he returns to London. What am I going to do?”

“You’re avoiding talking about Jeremy’s love, but that is fine,” said Mandee, drawing her in for a hug. “Either way, I wish to help you in

any way I can. No one should be forced to marry a man like Lord Bazeley. What do you need me to do?"

Tabitha squeezed her friend tighter, feeling relieved that she was firmly on her side.

"Thank you, Mandee. I have a letter that I need Jeremy to receive as soon as possible. We cannot delay because he has to change the plans slightly. That will impact everything else along our journey."

Mandee held her hand out. "Give me a note to take to him. I'll make an excuse about needing to see him."

Grinning, Tabitha pulled out the letter and placed it in her friend's hand. "I was hoping you would say that."

Perhaps their plan could be salvaged after all.

Tabitha could hardly believe it, but this was it. This was the night. Mandee had already taken her luggage and given it to Jeremy when no one was watching; now, it was a matter of getting to the kitchen and into the carriage. Tabitha would only be able to breathe properly once they were driving away from the gates, but she would have to get used to the feeling of her heart being in her mouth until then. She didn't know how Jeremy had been able to speed up their plan by a few nights, but she had been thankful for it.

Mandee's confession still plagued her mind, but Tabitha had vowed to set it aside until she could consider it. Finding out that Jeremy was in love with her was not something to be taken lightly. Tabitha still didn't know if that were even true! It seemed too good to be true. And yet, knowing it made her feel ... well, Tabitha couldn't quite put it into words. She certainly didn't dismiss what Mandee had claimed, but one thing at a time.

Holding a candle to a clock, Tabitha counted down the minutes until twelve. Everyone was fast asleep by now, including the servants. All Tabitha had to do was get to the servants' stairwell, climb down as quietly as she could, and walk through the kitchen door to the carriage waiting for her. It was such a simple thing, but it filled her with much trepidation. The curse of 'what ifs' had plagued her mind since she received a note from Jeremy detailing the night and hour of their escape.

What if one of the servants was still awake and heard her walking down the stairs? What if her mother had one of her sleepless nights and called for a servant to bring her warm honey milk? What if the carriage never arrived because one of its wheels fell off? There were so many what-ifs to consider that Tabitha had nearly driven herself crazy with them. Mandee had been the one to talk her out of it and wish her luck.

That had been the saddest part. Not knowing when she would see her friend again had hit Tabitha hard, and she had bawled her eyes out for a full hour. Mandee had comforted her while crying herself until the duchess walked into Tabitha's room demanding to know why they were crying.

Tabitha had said something along the lines of getting married and losing her childhood, which also had made her mother a little damp-eyed before she left the room shaking her head about them being silly girls.

Tabitha heard the downstairs grandfather clock strike midnight, but she still had to wait another twenty minutes before she could make her way down. Jeremy had cautioned that some people tended to wake up once the grandfather clock made its little announcement, but they fell off to sleep easily enough.

The twenty minutes was to ensure that everyone was sound asleep before venturing outside her door. Tabitha continued to keep an eye on her clock, almost becoming cross-eyed with the effort. The second it struck twenty past twelve, she stood up, blew out her candle, and secured her shawl around her. Mandee had left the door partially closed when she departed earlier that evening to avoid unnecessary door noises. The woman had even oiled the hinges to ensure the door wouldn't whine when Tabitha opened it.

Glancing back at her bed, Tabitha was pleased to see how realistic the pillows looked under the covers. Making everyone believe that she was sleeping would delay anyone coming to look for her, and any delay was welcome. Pulling the door slightly, Tabitha slipped through the gap she had made and walked towards the servants' staircase.

It was rather dark save for a candle or two burning in their holders, but Tabitha welcomed any light. Walking the hallway in the dead of night was not her cup of tea, but at least it was for a good cause. She hurried down the staircase, almost forgetting that one of the steps was squeaky. Stumbling slightly, she grabbed onto the sides of the stairs, praying that no one had heard her blunder.

"Just what I need," she whispered angrily to herself.

Why were the stairs so dark? Maybe she should suggest one candle

being lit so that people didn't ... oh, wait. Why was she concerned when she would no longer live here? Tabitha shook her head, laughing silently to herself. No one except her was foolish enough to come down these stairs at this time of the night, anyway.

She nearly yipped in surprise when she noticed a figure wearing a dark cloak at the foot of the stairs. Was that Jeremy? She paused, narrowing her eyes and squinting into the darkness. The figure looked about the same size as Jeremy, but maybe this person looked a little bigger.

That could be the cloak and darkness surrounding him that makes him look bigger. That must be Jeremy.

Who else could it be? Tabitha continued on her way, her heart beating faster as her trepidation gave way to excitement and joy when she neared Jeremy. He lifted his hand towards her, the paleness of his palm shining in the dimness. Tabitha placed her hand in his, smiling when Jeremy closed his hand over hers. It was tighter than necessary, but perhaps he was communicating to her that everything would go well from now.

She felt safer now than she had for a long time now and wondered what the future would hold for them. Did he truly love her? Tabitha tried to look under his cloak, but Jeremy was turned away from her. Perhaps this wasn't a topic she should be thinking about right now. She still had to walk through the kitchen and out the door to the waiting carriage. Had it arrived? Tabitha looked to the windows and was relieved to see the shadowy outline of a carriage. It was here!

Oh goodness! Just a little more to go, and I'll be free. I cannot believe this is really happening. I'll never doubt Jeremy again.

Jeremy didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave the kitchen, but perhaps he was being careful. The last thing they needed was to knock into something and wake up the whole household. The door was finally in reaching distance, and Tabitha longed to turn to Jeremy to tell him just how excited she was, but she kept it in. There would be enough time once they got into the carriage. Then she could talk as much as she wanted to.

The door opened as they reached it, but instead of walking through, Tabitha paused. This was indeed it. She smiled at Jeremy, hoping he could see her under that dark cloak, and stepped over the threshold towards her freedom. Tabitha wanted to twirl around as soon as the cool air hit her cheeks, but she uttered a cry of dismay as Ellie appeared out of nowhere.

"Oh, Tabby," the woman said, her voice so full of false concern. "What on earth are you doing here so late at night? Does Leo know?"

Ellie stepped towards her, looming in the open doorway. Tabitha immediately took a step back and tried to run, but the hand gripping hers wouldn't let her go. Instead, it tightened almost painfully around her hand.

"Let go," she cried in distress.

"Let go," Ellie mimicked. "Where are you going, little Tabby?"

Jeremy tugged her closer to him before lifting the hood of his cloak and letting it fall back. Tabitha lost her breath and all feeling in her limbs as she gazed into the smug face of her fiancé.

Chapter 17

Jeremy sat with his head in his hands, barely able to believe the mess he had caused. The Browning household was in an uproar because of him, and now Tabitha was shouldering all the blame. He couldn't even see her, for crying out loud! Perhaps it was better to keep away from the house as he had no idea of what information they had forced out of Tabitha. Would they find out that he was involved? Jeremy found that he didn't care. He was worried about Tabitha's well-being because it seemed no one else was. No, that sounded a tad cruel.

Jeremy was certain that Mandee was just as concerned, but he doubted anyone else was. They were probably hurling insults at Tabitha and demanding to know where she had wanted to go. It was evident that she had attempted to escape, and now they wouldn't rest until they knew the how and when of her attempt.

"Poor Tabitha," he mumbled. "What have I done?"

He jerked his head up when he heard someone close his office door with a soft click. A slightly untidy Mandee came hurrying towards him, her eyes full of determination.

"Mandee!" he cried.

"You have to help her," the woman said, perching on the end of a chair. "You have to help Tabitha."

"But how? They've caught her and will likely not let her out of their

sight."

"I know, Jeremy, but you need to come up with something. You're our Tabitha's only hope. If you don't help her, then all is lost."

Mandee looked at him like some saviour, but Jeremy simply felt like a fraud. He had promised to help Tabitha, but look where that help had got her? It was his fault that she had been caught.

"Our plan failed, Mandee. Don't you understand that? Our plan failed miserably."

"But no one knows that you were involved in the plan," Mandee told him. "If no one knows, then you can do something. No one will question you."

"Tabitha is shouldering all the blame?"

The woman nodded. "She doesn't want you to get into trouble. Don't you see? If you're above blame, you can think up another plan to get her out of the house before she has to marry Lord Bazeley. That man is evil, Jeremy. You have to get her away from him."

Jeremy rubbed the back of his head. He felt a headache coming on and put it down to stress and a lack of sleep. How was Tabitha coping? Here he was free and worrying about a mere headache when she was truly caught in a web of pending destruction. Lord Bazeley was slowly pulling Tabitha into his world and wrapping her in his web until he finally suffocated her. How would Jeremy be able to live with himself then?

“I want to help; I really do, but I don’t know what to do. How will I get her out of the house?”

“She stays in her room most of the time, but she is chaperoned by Ellie or the duchess if she steps out.” Mandee looked away and sniffed. “The duke has deemed them more reliable.”

“I’m sorry, Mandee. This has affected you as well, hasn’t it?”

“Well, I’m apparently not as reliable as I used to be, so I suppose so. However, that doesn’t bother me nearly as much as worrying about Tabitha marrying the marquess. I would gladly be called many things if that meant it could save her. Alas, situations do not work like that.”

If only they did. Jeremy would have gladly marched up to the house and taken all the blame if they would only let Tabitha be, but that would likely cause more damage and really stop him from helping Tabitha. If he could still help her.

“What happened, Jeremy?” Mandee asked. “Why weren’t you there to meet her as you said you would? I still don’t understand what happened. How did Lord Bazeley and Ellie come to be where you were supposed to be? How did they find out about the plan?”

Mandee had many questions, but at least Jeremy could answer one of them. “I do not know how they came to hear about the plan, but as for my whereabouts, I was delayed after receiving a letter from an associate.”

Jeremy paused, wondering how much he should let Mandee know. Whatever he told her would undoubtedly be repeated to Tabitha, and he didn't want to frighten her. Jeremy decided that giving Mandee vague details would be best.

"What was in the letter?" Mandee asked, sounding a bit impatient. "It had to be important to keep you from saving Tabitha."

Jeremy winced at the bite in the woman's words. He knew that he deserved it, but he had good reason for not being where he should have been last night. Part of him wished he had been so he could have seen Bazeley and Ellie make their way to the kitchen. Jeremy would have found a way to either warn Tabitha or startle the pair into running off. Unfortunately, he hadn't done either.

"I received a letter that confirmed the kind of man Lord Bazeley is. There is no doubt that he is evil, but I need a little more evidence to prove it."

"Do you think the letter is enough to convince the duke?"

Jeremy shook his head. "I don't believe so. That is why I need more evidence. Lord Bazeley is a crafty man and can get himself out of difficult situations. I do not want to give him the chance to work himself out of anything I have to show the duke."

"Understandable," Mandee agreed. "But what now? Where will you get this evidence?"

“I’m looking for it as we speak, but I’d like you to give Tabitha a note. I need to apologise for not helping her as I should have. Do you think you’ll be able to do that?”

Mandee thought about it for a moment. Tabitha would no longer be alone, which would make it harder for the woman to communicate anything with her.

Mandee finally nodded slowly. “I think I know of a way to get the note to her, but it will be tricky. The duchess will be easier to get around, but not so much Lady Whittier. She has eyes in the back of her head.”

Jeremy nearly laughed at that, but it wasn’t amusing. “Thank you. I’ll write just a short letter now that you can deliver to her as soon as you can.”

He took out a pen and paper, quickly writing a short note. Jeremy almost added his name but thought better of it. It would be a disaster if anyone came across this letter and put two and two together. He had a feeling the duke would fire him and dirty his name faster than Jeremy could get out of town. He didn’t bother writing Tabitha’s name, but the contents would be enough to show who it was intended for. Once done, Jeremy folded it twice and handed it to Mandee, who took it and left, promising to return with a message from Tabitha.

“That’s if she wishes to speak to me,” he said quietly to himself.

He might have broken her trust in him after what he did or rather didn’t do yesterday. Jeremy was just going to have to wait.

Fortunately for him, the wait wasn't too long. Mandee returned within the hour with a note from Tabitha. Jeremy wasted no time opening it and reading its contents, sighing with relief. Tabitha wasn't angry at him at all.

She even went as far as to thank him for his kindness and trusted his discretion in this challenging manner. Was there any doubt as to why he had fallen in love with her? Tabitha had every right to feel angry and hurt, but she wasn't. She was still the sweet woman he had secretly given his heart to. What could he write in return?

"Will you wait for a response?" he asked Mandee.

"I anticipated as much. But do hurry as I have other chores to do. I would hate anyone to question why I keep going back and forth between houses."

Jeremy thanked her and sat down to pen another letter. What should he say now?

I suppose I could thank her for trusting me once again. I undoubtedly do not deserve it, but it means so much to me. I want to write so much more, but I might scare her off. How does a man express his feelings without giving away how he truly feels about a woman?

That was like asking a bird to build a nest but not make it look too

much like a nest. Was it even possible? Perhaps it was with the correct word choice. Jeremy took a little longer writing the note and still wasn't sure about its contents when he handed it to Mandee.

"Thank you again, Mandee," he said. "I know that you're risking a lot to do this."

"But it's worth it. I'll return in a little while if Tabitha has anything to give me."

If Tabitha had anything? Jeremy hadn't considered Tabitha not returning his letter. He had got so caught up in receiving the first response that he hadn't thought about not receiving a second note. Perhaps he was just pushing it.

After Mandee left, Jeremy tried his best not to take notice of the time. Instead, he did everything he could to keep himself occupied, all the while thinking about keeping in sight of the house in case Mandee came to see him. It was pathetic but true. When two hours had passed, Jeremy felt disappointed but quickly chastised himself for it. Tabitha was likely busy, or someone could be watching. There were many reasons why she had not or could not send a letter back to him. Knowing this didn't make him feel any better.

"What is wrong with me?" he muttered under his breath.

Perhaps a ride with Wolfe would help him clear his head of his obsession and get it back on important matters like gaining Tabitha's freedom. That was what truly mattered. Jeremy had a few leads to investigate Lord Bazeley's reputation and hoped the one he chose to follow would be the one to bring the man down. It was more imperative than ever before not to make a mistake.

“Jeremy!” he heard Mandee call out to him.

Whatever next thought was in his mind vanished as Jeremy spun around and watched Mandee approach him. Did she have something for him? He didn’t see any paper in her hand, but he did notice a book.

“You were not at the house,” she accused.

“I apologise. I had a few things to sort out.”

“Here,” she said. “Look on page five. You’ll find a letter from Tabitha. I had to carry a book around with me because Lady Whittier is growing suspicious.”

“That was a smart thing to do,” Jeremy replied, eagerly taking the book. “How will I return one to her?”

“I’ll return in half an hour to fetch the book. Place the note between pages twenty-one and twenty-two.”

“Why those pages specifically?”

“Humour me, Jeremy.”

He smiled. “Very well. I’ll leave the book on my desk once I’m done and go about my duties. I’m coming up to the house to inspect Tabitha’s conservatory, so you’ll be able to give me the next letter then. If there is one,” Jeremy added quickly.

“There likely will be one,” Mandee said with a chuckle.

The woman walked away still laughing, evidently amused by his eagerness. It was a little embarrassing, and he should probably put a stop to the back and forth, but Jeremy was enjoying himself too much to do that. He sped-walked to his office, flipping to page five, where a slightly longer letter lay waiting for him. Jeremy wasted no time reading it, his grin growing the more he read.

“She thinks I’m a valiant knight,” he said with a bit of pride.

No one had called him that before. Did she see herself as the princess whom the knight risks his life to save? Did she know that the princess and knight eventually fall in love?

Jeremy already had his paper and pen waiting, having not put them away after the last letter.

“This time, I’ll tell her how much I admire her,” he decided aloud. “Any good man would be privileged to have her as his wife. No, that might seem forward.”

But it was true. Jeremy decided to put it in any way and hoped

Tabitha would take it in the right way. His letter was as close as he could get to telling Tabitha he loved her without actually writing 'I love you'. If the last letter gave any indication of his feelings, then this one most certainly laid his heart bare. Jeremy was still careful to word it not to seem like a direct declaration of love, but anyone with a heart could tell what it was.

Jeremy folded the letter three times and tucked it into the pages before leaving his office. He decided to wait an hour before going to the conservatory but gave up after forty-five minutes and made his way there. He would simply have to come up with an excuse about why he decided to come earlier.

Jeremy had just entered the house when he met Mandee coming out.

"I thought I was going to meet you in the conservatory," she said.

"I had more time on my hands and decided to use it working on Tabitha's flowers," he answered smoothly.

Mandee gave him a dubious look but passed the book to him. The next few seconds seemingly happened in slow motion. Jeremy could see Lord Bazeley walking their way from the corner of his eye at the same time a letter dropped out of the book. Mandee noticed it as well and bent down to get it, but she wasn't fast enough. Lord Bazeley snatched it from the floor, smiling as he held it in his hand.

"What, pray tell, is this?" he asked. "A love letter, maybe? Is there something happening between you?"

“Would you please give me the note, My Lord?” Mandee begged. “It belongs to me.”

“Indeed? Let’s see what it says.”

“Please, My Lord,” said Jeremy. “Give Mandee her letter.”

“Not before I’ve read it. You would not deny the future master of this house, would you?”

Jeremy and Mandee could only watch helplessly as the marquess read the letter, his face showing them nothing.

“How interesting,” the man eventually said, looking up. “Perhaps the duke should see this as well.”

“No, My Lord,” Mandee pleaded.

Jeremy didn’t bother saying anything because he knew it wouldn’t help. Lord Bazeley was going to do whatever he wanted to.

“Come, come, now, Mandee dear,” the marquess crooned. “Why don’t you and Jeremy come with me to the drawing-room?”

It wasn’t a request but a prettily-made order. They had no choice but to follow the man. The duke looked surprised when he saw them enter

with the marquess, but his face quickly became puzzled when Lord Bazeley handed him the letter.

“It seems we have love birds living among us, Your Grace,” the man said.

“Love birds?” the duke repeated.

“Read the letter, Your Grace,” Lord Bazeley insisted.

The duke quickly went through the contents. “It does seem like a love letter,” he said, looking up. “Whose is it?”

“It’s mine, Your Grace,” Mandee immediately claimed.

“Yours?” The Marquess laughed. “I had no clue that you were such an accomplished writer, my dear. Where did you learn to write such lovely words?”

“This is not you, Mandee,” the duke agreed. “But it does look like Jeremy’s handwriting. How can that be?”

Jeremy clenched his jaw, struggling to appear calm. His letter? Mandee was probably keeping all the notes on separate pages to avoid anyone finding them, but she had not bargained on one of them slipping out.

“We have our own love story unfolding before our very eyes, Your Grace,” the marquess commented but kept his eyes on Jeremy and Mandee. “It seems that our little maid is too busy to look after your daughter. Might I suggest having the housekeeper watch her from now on? And while we’re at it, perhaps Jeremy and Mandee should marry soon. We wouldn’t want an illegitimate child running around the estate, would we?”

Jeremy narrowed his eyes at the man. Was the marques suggesting he was having a love affair with Mandee?

“I think you’re right, Leo,” the duke agreed. “I do not need that sort of scandal from my own steward and daughter’s maid. I expect you to get married soon after Tabitha’s wedding, Jeremy.”

Jeremy couldn’t even get a word in edgeways because Lord Bazeley immediately stood up and held his hand out to him.

“May I be the first to congratulate you, my good man?” said the marquess. “It seems we’ll both be made honest men soon.”

Poor Mandee uttered a harsh sob and fled the room. Rather than take Lord Bazeley’s hand, Jeremy bowed and excused himself. He found Mandee hiding in the conservatory, her shoulders shaking.

“I’m so sorry, Mandee,” Jeremy began. “That marquess is a terrible man. This is all just a confusing matter, but we’ll straighten it out somehow.”

Mandee shook her head, turning her tear-stained face to him. “But he is not completely wrong, Jeremy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh!” cried Mandee, covering her face briefly. “The truth is that I do have feelings for you, but I know you cannot return them. I do not hate you for that, not in the slightest. I want you to save Tabitha from that man more than anything else.”

Jeremy wasn’t sure where to look. Stunned was not a strong enough word, but it was the only one he could think of. Mandee had feelings for him? How had he not picked it up?

“Please, do not pay me any mind, Jeremy,” said Mandee. “I felt that I needed to confess my feelings to you, but I do not want it to change our friendship. I do not expect anything from you but Tabitha’s freedom.”

Jeremy rubbed his neck. “Well, uh, I guess I feel honoured that you, uh, like me.”

Mandee covered her face again and spoke between her fingers. “Let’s not talk about this. Rather tell me how you’re going to help Tabitha.”

“Right. I can do that. I, um …” What could he say? Goodness! This confession had made things awkward. “I need to go to a village near York to find out some information a friend told me about.”

Mandee lowered her hands, showing her bright pink cheeks. “When will you go?”

“As soon as I can, but I hate leaving Tabitha without a protector.”

“I’ll protect her however I can,” Mandee promised. “I know how to make Mrs Cummings do my bidding.”

Jeremy wanted to say that he felt assured, but he didn’t. He could only hope that nothing horrible befell Tabitha while he was gone.

Chapter 18

Tabitha lay on her back and watched the clouds above her. She had loved assigning a creature or object to each cloud as a young girl, often coming up with elaborate stories to explain her choices. Once, she had seen a pig walking on a dirt path with just a few daisies on each side.

Another time she had watched a dragon blow billows of smoke through its nostrils, but her most imaginative one had been a knight in shining armour galloping towards a castle where a princess awaited him. She had called Jeremy a knight and had wondered if he had understood what she had subtly tried to tell him.

“Are we going to stare at clouds for the whole day?” asked Mandee.

The woman rolled onto her belly and stared down at Tabitha. They had been sitting outside for nearly an hour, and Tabitha had begun to turn pink. Mandee’s skin would only darken in colour, but Tabitha always burned. It was unfair, just like everything else in her life.

“Has Mrs Cummings fallen asleep yet?” she asked.

Mandee looked over her shoulder and nodded. “I think she fell asleep half an hour ago.”

Tabitha turned onto her belly as well. “Good. I’m tired of having her watch me. I don’t know why, but I just don’t trust her anymore.”

“I never trusted her to begin with!” Mandee exclaimed. “She is far too eager to do things for a little money. It makes one wonder what she would do for more money.”

Tabitha had thought about the same thing. Sometimes, she wondered if the housekeeper had been the one to tell Ellie about the man Tabitha had sold her belongings to. Perhaps Mrs Cummings had also been the one to eavesdrop on a conversation between her and Jeremy and fed the information to Lord Bazeley for a bit of palm greasing. It was all possible, but Tabitha had no proof.

“Mama said the dressmaker was coming today for my last fitting,” she said with no emotion in her voice.

The duchess had finally decided on someone to make the dress for the wedding ceremony, but the woman had insisted on letting someone else create the dress Tabitha would wear when she left for her honeymoon. Wasn’t it supposed to be the same dress as the ceremony?

“Why do you sound as though you have given up all hope of being rescued?” asked Mandee.

“Perhaps I have. I do not see any other alternatives, Mandee. I’m marrying that rake whether I want to or not.”

Mandee sat up, tucking her dress around her legs as she drew them to her chest. “That is not any way to think, you know. You need to have more faith in Jeremy.”

“I believe that he’ll do whatever he possibly can, but whatever he does might not be enough, Mandee. I’ve finally realised how dangerous and crafty Leo is. I still do not know how he managed to find out about my escape. That alone scares me.”

Tabitha was still angry that she had not been able to tell that the hooded man was not Jeremy. She might have run back up the stairs and stayed in her room instead of allowing the marquess and his sister to trap her. There had been a moment of doubt, but her excitement had overwhelmed it and pushed her to look on the positive side. Well, look where thinking positively had got her?

“You’re not a person who admits to being scared so easily, yet you have said it several times in the last few weeks,” said Mandee. “Where is your courage? Where is the woman who had vowed to face beasts to gain her freedom if need be?”

Tabitha arched an eyebrow. “I do not recall saying that I will face beasts.”

“Is Lord Bazeley not a beast?”

Tabitha thought about it for a moment and nodded. “I see your point. I thought you meant a real beast.”

“Some people think Man is the real beast. It only takes a brief page through a world history book to see their point.”

“I agree, I suppose, but don’t let anyone like Lord Bazeley or Papa

hear you say that. They pride themselves on being civilised gentlemen."

So civilised they bartered human beings and gambled estates away. Tabitha still felt bitter about what her father had done and would likely remain bitter for years to come.

"I wouldn't dare. I prefer to stay far away from them. Especially after they arranged that Jeremy and I should get married after you do. My only consolation is knowing that Jeremy will have saved you before any of their plans can take place."

Tabitha had been alarmed when Mandee told her about Lord Bazeley finding the note. She had never expected the situation to turn into an arranged marriage.

"Then we must hope that Jeremy gets back on time."

Mandee's brow puckered as she stared down at Tabitha. "Do you believe that Jeremy would agree to such a thing? He loves you, Tabitha. A man in love will not willingly marry another."

Tabitha sighed. "I suppose not. I only wish I had known of his affections sooner."

Tabitha had wasted so much time being alone when she could have been with Jeremy.

“But you do know that you would not have been able to publicly display your affections?”

Tabitha nodded. “Yes, I’m aware. I do not think I would have minded a secret relationship. Having a man who loves you in secret is better than marrying a man who will humiliate you in public.”

Mandee bent to give her a one-arm hug, squeezing her tight. “Do cheer up, Tabby. I know that everything looks bad now, but everything will work out for the best. I promise. Just don’t give up hope.”

That was easier said than done, but Tabitha nodded anyway. What did it hurt to let her friend hold onto her hope?

Jeremy was grimy and dusty by the time he arrived at the village. He didn’t bother resting but went straight to the church and prayed that the vicar would be there. Jeremy found a man praying at the altar and hoped it was Reverend Finch. Sitting down on a wooden bench, he left the man to finish his prayer, offering one up himself. Jeremy’s prayer was simple. He needed God to save Tabitha from Lord Bazeley’s claws and hoped the Almighty would use the humble vicar to do so.

Jeremy had to wait another twenty minutes before the man stood up and turned around. He looked taken aback to see someone else in the church but still welcomed Jeremy with a warm smile.

“Good day, my son,” the man said. “Have you come to enquire of the

Lord?”

“I have come to speak to His servant, Reverend Finch. Do you know where I might find him?”

The man’s smile grew wider. “If you prayed to meet him, then your prayers have been answered. I am Reverend Finch, my good sir.”

Jeremy held out his hand, appreciating the vicar’s firm grip. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. I was sent a letter by a good friend who said you might be able to help me. Do you recognise these names?”

Jeremy handed the frowning man the letter, wondering if the vicar would remember the names. Everything was riding on this.

“This name is familiar. I recall marrying a couple with the surname Whittier as though it were yesterday. The man was quite handsome with broad shoulders, but he was far too sure of himself. The woman seemed brass but pretty. Theirs were not a match I would have immediately chosen.”

The vicar appeared to be describing the marquess and his sister, but Jeremy needed more proof.

“Is there any chance that I could see the church records?”

Reverend Finch shook his head. “I’m afraid not, son. That is not allowed by anyone outside this church. I can, however, write a letter

if that helps."

Jeremy was disappointed about not gaining access to the records, but if the vicar said he could recall the couple and give a physical description, then that just might be enough to save Tabitha.

"A letter would be great, Reverend. Please make it as detailed as possible."

"Certainly, my son. Please, step this way. My office is just off the side of the church. It makes it so much more convenient."

Jeremy followed the man into a small room that fitted the bare necessities and not much else. Could the parish not have given the man a better office?

"It's small, but it does the job well," the vicar said, observing Jeremy.

The man must have watched him stare and thought him a snob. That was not an image he wished to portray.

"It looks just right," Jeremy commented. "Who needs something bigger?"

"Most men to prove how masculine they are. It's always a competition."

Jeremy knew that all too well. How many times had he compared himself to Lord Bazeley?

The vicar gestured at a seat as he sat, took out his writing items, and wrote a brief but accurate note about Lord Bazeley and Ellie Whittier.

“This should confirm without a doubt that I know this couple,” said Reverend Finch. “I think I can recall all the couples I have ever married in this church.”

The man handed the letter to Jeremy, giving him time to read through it. It sounded perfect and damning for the marquess.

“Thank you, sir. You have no notion of what this means to me.”

“I hope it helps you on your mission, young man.”

Jeremy grinned. “It surely will. Please excuse me, sir. I still have a day’s ride back to Surrey.”

“You plan to ride back now?” the man asked. “Why not stay the night?”

“A special person’s life depends on what this letter contains, Reverend. I cannot afford to sleep. Thank you once again, and please excuse me.”

Jeremy gave him a bow and hurried out of the church, swinging onto his horse and riding away. A sense of dread had followed him all the way to the village, but now it had grown. Was something happening back on the estate? Jeremy hoped not.

He was just a day and a half away from the estate and planned to ride night and day to save the woman he loved, but would he make it back in time? Jeremy didn't know and didn't want to think about what would happen if he failed.

Chapter 19

Tabitha had no more fingernails to bite, but that didn't stop her from gnawing on her index finger. Her wedding day had arrived, and still, Jeremy was nowhere in sight. Mandee was doing all she could to delay the ceremony and keep her spirits up, but Tabitha was still worried that nothing they did would stop Leo from getting his way.

"I've destroyed it as much as I can without making it obvious," said Mandee, showing her the wedding dress. "The seams should buy us some time."

"I hope Mama believes your story. Even I would doubt that mice could do so much damage in so little time. Mama inspected the dress yesterday and found it acceptable."

"But she didn't anticipate you losing weight and having a sudden mice infestation, did she?"

Tabitha hadn't actually lost any weight, and she was certain her room didn't have a mice infestation, but if those were the excuses Mandee wanted to use, so be it.

They both turned to the door when they heard a sharp knock before the duchess entered the room. The older woman stared at the scene before her in dismay, her eyes flitting from Tabitha still sitting in her robe and Mandee holding an unfinished-looking wedding dress.

"What on earth is going on?" the woman demanded. "The celebratory

breakfast is almost done, and yet you're not even ready for the ceremony, Tabitha! Everyone is waiting for you."

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," said Mandee. "But this dress needs altering."

"Why? There was nothing wrong with it yesterday."

Mandee stood up and showed the woman the torn seams. "Mice got hold of this dress while we all slept. It doesn't even fit my poor lady anymore. Can't you see how she has lost weight?"

Mandee pointed at Tabitha, who tried to keep a serious face. The acting was dramatic and quite comical, but Tabitha did not want to be the person to ruin Mandee's lie. The young woman was adamant that Jeremy was on his way and was buying him time.

Tabitha watched her mother inspect the dress, shaking her head. "Mice did this? I don't believe it."

"But you must because that is what happened, Your Grace," Mandee insisted. "I've had to repair dresses before because of those naughty nice, but this is certainly the worst I have ever come across."

The duchess handed the dress over to Mandee with a sigh. "Very well, do what you must. Perhaps this is another reason why the wedding shouldn't happen today."

The last bit was said more to herself, but Tabitha and Mandee looked

at each other with wide eyes. What did the duchess mean by that? Was she having second thoughts about the wedding?

"Why not stop it, Mama?" Tabitha asked, sliding off her bed and going to stand before her mother. "Ask Papa to postpone or cancel it."

The duchess shook her head. "I cannot do that, Tabitha. You know that. How can I openly go against your father's wishes? I have never done so, and I won't start now. If he has accepted this union, then so be it."

Tabitha wasn't surprised by her mother's response, but it did disappoint her. "Very well. We'll do what we can to get ready for the ceremony."

She turned away and went back to her bed, drawing her legs up to her chest to hide her face behind them. There was silence in the room for several heartbeats before her mother spoke again.

"Continue to work on the dress until it's perfect, Mandee," the duchess ordered. "I'll try to explain the matter to the duke and Leo."

"Thank you, Mama," Tabitha mumbled behind her knees.

It was a knee-jerk response, but Tabitha wasn't thankful at all. She waited until her mother left the room before looking at her friend.

"Make sure that dress is never ready."

Mandee smiled. “You read my mind.”

Mandee’s plan seemed to have worked because the ceremony time came and went, and Tabitha’s dress was still not ready. Her mother had appeared relieved when she came to inform Tabitha that the wedding had been postponed until tomorrow, but not more than ten minutes later, the duchess appeared again, her face tight with suppressed emotion.

“What is it, Mama?”

The duchess looked her over and nodded. “That dress will have to do.”

Tabitha felt icy fingers trail down her spine. “What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, dear, but Leo has insisted that the ceremony be today, or he will call the wedding off. You know that your father cannot afford that. He has asked me to come and fetch you.”

“No! But my dress isn’t ready,” Tabitha cried, already feeling hopelessness setting in. “Tell her, Mandee.”

“Yes, Your Grace. The dress needs a few more hours. Surely Lord Bazeley can wait one day?”

“I’m afraid not,” the duchess replied. “You need to come with me, Tabitha. Your father is waiting downstairs and has threatened to drag you out himself if you do not come.”

This could not be happening! How could her own father threaten to drag her to the chapel?

“I can’t get married in this dress,” Tabitha declared, grasping at any excuse possible. “It’s not suitable for a wedding.”

She had thrown a simple day dress over her underthings when her mother had announced the wedding delay and thought to have some breakfast, but now it had somehow become her wedding dress. Tabitha desperately wished someone would jump out of the corner and tell her that this was all some elaborate joke.

“It will have to do, Tabitha,” her mother insisted. “Put on some shoes, please. I’ll give you five minutes to fix your hair. Do not take any longer, dear. Your father meant his threat.”

Tabitha swallowed back a sob as she watched her mother leave the room. How could this be? She should have never got her hopes up! Mandee came to her side and tried to tell her everything would work out, but Tabitha pushed her away.

“How? How will it all work out? I have to get ready for my wedding, Mandee, or Papa will come and fetch me. Please, just do my hair.”

Tabitha was trembling when she sat down, but she refused to cry. It was only later, when her father half-dragged her down the aisle towards the marquess, that she began to earnestly weep. Leo looked unfazed as he stood calmly by the vicar and watched her approach him, his cold eyes almost mocking her.

“Papa,” Tabitha wept. “Please, do not do this.”

“Hush, Tabitha!” her father scolded impatiently. “This is for the good of the family. Stop embarrassing me.”

The duke all but thrust her at the marquess and took his place beside his wife. Ellie stood on the other side near Leo, seemingly untouched by the tearful scene. No one else was in the chapel to witness Tabitha’s doom.

“You may proceed with the ceremony, Reverend Abernethy,” said Leo.

The small man nodded, his eyes darting to Tabitha before starting with a lengthy prayer. When the time came to say her vows, Tabitha found that she could hardly get the words out of her mouth.

“Speak up, my dear,” Leo ordered, his eyes flashing at her. “Our kind reverend cannot hear you.”

Tabitha swallowed hard and nodded, tears still coursing down her face as she tried to repeat after the vicar.

“I, Tabitha Browning, do–”

“Stop!”

Tabitha almost collapsed in relief when she saw Jeremy running towards them, waving a paper in his hand.

“Jeremy!” she sobbed.

“You must stop this wedding,” Jeremy demanded. “It is a travesty and cannot go on.”

The duke stepped in his way, his moustache bristling with anger. “How dare you, Jeremy! What is the meaning of all this?”

“I dare this and so much more, Your Grace,” Jeremy replied, not flinching. “You should never have allowed this wedding to take place.”

Tabitha’s watched her father’s face turn deep red. “Why you–”

“Alfred,” the duchess interrupted. “Let Jeremy speak. There must be a reason why he has interrupted the wedding. Come and sit down and let him speak.”

Tabitha was surprised at her mother but didn't have the time to appreciate the duchess' newfound backbone. Her eyes were only for Jeremy.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Jeremy said, bowing towards her. "I do have a valid reason for interrupting this wedding, and it's in my hand."

Leo startled Tabitha when he began to clap. "What a dramatic entrance, Jeremy. Now, would you take you and your silly paper out of this chapel? Tabitha and I are in the middle of our vows."

Jeremy looked at him coldly. "How can you marry Tabitha when you are already married?"

Already married? Tabitha watched the marquess' eyes narrow. "Excuse me? How dare you accuse me of such treachery?"

"Because it's true, and this is proof," Jeremy declared, waving the paper before giving it to the duke. "Read it, Your Grace. You will find that Lady Whittier is not Lord Bazeley's half-sister but his wife. They have used this lie of being siblings to trick people out of their money all across England. These people are nothing but frauds."

The duke didn't say a word as he read the letter, but Leo didn't appear bothered. He turned to the vicar and asked the man to continue with the ceremony. Was he so confident that Jeremy's proof would not affect him? Tabitha prayed that it would.

“Not a word, Reverend Abernethy,” the duke thundered as he got to his feet. “This wedding is over! Did you think you could pull the wool over our eyes and take my daughter, knowing that you’re already married? How dare you!”

“Surely you do not believe this servant?” the marquess asked with a laugh.

How did the man manage to be so confident when it was evident to everyone that he had been caught in a lie?

“Can you disprove this letter from the very reverend who married you?” the duke questioned. “Reverend Finch seems to remember you and your so-called sister well. Jeremy, hold onto Lord Bazeley until the bailiff arrives.”

“With pleasure, Your Grace,” said Jeremy and lunged for Leo.

Unfortunately, the man was faster and escaped Jeremy’s hands. The man was out of the chapel before anyone could make sense of his escape, leaving a hysterical Ellie behind.

“You idiot!” the woman screamed. “How can you leave me like this?”

“Calm down, Lady Bazeley,” the duchess commanded. “I have had more of you than I can take.”

Ellie shut her mouth, but she couldn't hide the fear in her eyes. Tabitha didn't feel a shred of pity for the woman. Ellie would have allowed her husband to illegally marry another and done nothing about it. She deserved whatever punishment came her way.

"I cannot believe this," Tabitha heard her father say. "Lord Bazeley tricked all of us. How could I have been so foolish? Thank you, Jeremy. Thank you for saving our Tabitha from my own foolishness."

Jeremy bowed towards the man. "It was my duty and my pleasure, Your Grace. Lord Bazeley had to be stopped."

Tabitha stepped forward, gaining everyone's attention. She had to admit something before losing her nerve but was worried about how everyone would receive her words.

I need to do this while Papa is in a good and charitable mood.

Tabitha didn't dare look at Jeremy but approached her father. "Papa," she said, gaining the man's attention.

"Yes, dear?"

"There is someone that I wish to marry. I love him and only wish to marry him."

Her father pulled his head back and drew his eyebrows together. "Who is this man? Why have you never spoke of him before?"

Tabitha looked at Jeremy and smiled. “Jeremy is the man I love, Papa. I wish to marry him.”

Jeremy appeared startled at first, but the smile he gave her said more than a thousand words. Tabitha blushed and looked away, happy to see that Jeremy did indeed feel the same way. Part of her had worried had Mandee was wrong, but taking this risk had paid off.

“Jeremy?” the duke repeated. “But he is our servant! I’m thankful to him for saving you, dear, but ...”

“I love your daughter, Your Grace,” Jeremy declared. “And I will treat her better than any man you could possibly choose for her.”

“But you don’t have any money!” the man spluttered.

Tabitha’s heart sunk. Would her father deny her the man she loved over money? Hadn’t he learnt his lesson?

“Would it help if I told you that Lady Bazeley was not the only thing the marquess left behind?” Jeremy asked.

The duke frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Lord Bazeley has left a considerable sum in the Manor, Your Grace.

That should be enough to cover your debts. As for having money to take care of your daughter, I have savings, and I've wisely invested my money in lucrative ventures. Tabitha will never want for anything."

The duke looked between Tabitha and Jeremy, doubt still clouding his face. "Do you really love this man, Tabby?"

"With all my heart, Papa."

The duke nodded. "I suppose Jeremy has proven himself, but I cannot say that I am too thrilled about the match."

What was her father saying? Tabitha wished he would stop beating around the bush.

"Put them out of their misery and say what you mean, dear," the duchess admonished.

"Fine! I approve of this match, but there must be a courtship before we even discuss an engagement."

Tabitha gave a cry of joy and flung her arms around her father's neck. "Thank you, Papa!"

The duke awkwardly patted her head before she drew away from him and shyly glanced at Jeremy. Tabitha wanted to run into his arms but wisely stayed put. There would be enough of that for the rest of their lives.

Epilogue

Three Months Later

Jeremy looked at the scene before him, marvelling at how much had changed in just a few months. Did he ever think in his wildest dreams that the duke would throw a party for him? No, not once. He hadn't even believed that he would be allowed to court Tabitha, and yet he was. Jeremy was careful not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but he had to admit that his life appeared surreal.

"Jeremy!" the duke said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "I have some friends I want you to meet."

Jeremy was about to say, 'not gambling friends, I hope,' but he wisely held his tongue. The man had mended his ways and stopped gambling, but Jeremy still kept his eyes on him. He didn't want the same situation as the last time to come up and take away his chance to be with the woman he loved. Tabitha was nearly his, but Jeremy had yet to make it official by asking the duke for his daughter's hand in marriage. Jeremy planned to do just that soon and was merely looking for the right time.

The duke steered him to a group of men and introduced Jeremy to all of them. Jeremy recognised one or two but greeted them as though he didn't know them.

"Did you know he now holds a seat in Parliament?" the duke said proudly, pushing out his meaty chest.

“Oh, indeed?” the one man asked, sounding impressed. “Good on you, Mr Gibbs. We need a pair of fresh eyes and a new voice in Parliament.”

Jeremy thanked the man. “I hope that I can represent my county in the way it needs, Mr Banks.”

Although the duke had given Jeremy his permission to court Tabitha, the man had still felt some doubt about his position as a servant. He had taken it upon himself to launch Jeremy’s political career, which was somewhat ironic considering the duke had laughed when Jeremy had told him about his political aspirations. However, it had become a reality, making Jeremy good enough for the duke’s daughter. Jeremy would have agreed to anything if it meant keeping Tabitha.

“I’m sure you’ll do stupendously,” Mr Banks assured. “Storping tells me you have a natural ability for it. That certainly helps.”

“I’m counting on that,” Jeremy agreed.

The men continued to discuss Parliament issues, and all wanted to hear Jeremy’s take on the latest political developments in the land. Jeremy answered truthfully and appeared to impress the men so much that he earned another warm clasp on his shoulder from the duke.

“You’ve done well, son,” the man said, obviously happy. “You’ve done well.”

Jeremy realised that now was the time to broach the subject of getting

engaged to Tabitha.

“May I speak to you privately, Your Grace?” Jeremy asked, leaning towards the man’s ears.

“Now?” the man asked, frowning.

“Yes, please. I have an important matter to discuss with you.”

“Very well,” the duke replied, nodding. “Lead the way. I’ll be with you in a moment, gentlemen,” the duke told his guests. “I have a few matters to attend to.”

Jeremy went straight to the duke’s study, vaguely realising that the estate would one day be his if he married Tabitha. That wasn’t the reason he was marrying her, but it was something to think about.

He took his usual seat once the duke had settled behind his desk and suddenly felt his nerves get the best of him. Was this the right time to ask for Tabitha’s hand? The household was currently celebrating its good fortune with all the servants, tenants, and friends with a feast that could last a day or two. Perhaps Jeremy should wait until it was all over, but he found that he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to go another day, not making his love for Tabitha official.

“What did you need to talk to me about?” the duke asked. “Whatever it is, seems important. I do not think I’ve ever seen you this nervous.

Jeremy hadn't thought he was so transparent. "It is important, Your Grace. Perhaps more important than anything I could ever want in my life."

"Then spit it out," the duke said with a chuckle. "I rarely see you looking so tense."

Jeremy nodded, taking a deep breath. "I've thought long and hard about this, Your Grace, and I believe this is the perfect time for it. May I please have your daughter's hand in marriage? Nothing would make me happier than making her my wife."

The duke's eyes widened for a moment before he sat back in his chair. "I wondered when you would come to me about this."

"I wanted to wait for the right moment, Your Grace," Jeremy explained. "We were so busy establishing my political career that I thought I would wait until I secured my seat. We've done that. Now, I simply wish to marry your daughter."

The duke smiled. "I never thought I would allow my steward to marry my daughter, but you're no longer just my steward, are you? You've become a well-known man with your own little wealth that keeps growing. It would be foolish of me to deny my daughter the man she loves."

Jeremy held his breath. "Does this mean yes?"

"Yes, Jeremy. You have my blessings."

Jeremy grinned, standing up and holding his hand out to the duke. “Thank you, Your Grace. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

The man shook his hand warmly. “Oh, I think I do. I suppose you’ll go and tell Tabitha now. I might as well tell my wife. She has been just as impatient to see her daughter married.”

Jeremy thanked the man again and went in search of Tabitha. He didn’t find her anywhere in the house, which meant she was probably in her favourite place. Would she be as happy as he was once he told her the good news? Jeremy smiled, feeling the answer in his heart. Tabitha loved him-- that was answer enough.

Parties could quickly become overwhelming, but Tabitha didn’t mind. It was for Jeremy and his success, a success that he richly deserved. She knew he was proud of his achievement but probably not as proud as her father.

Tabitha’s father had wasted no time telling people about Jeremy’s new position in Parliament and openly boasted that it was his idea for Jeremy to try for the county seat. She knew that Jeremy had had the ambition to do just that, but her father had certainly helped him along. Would her father now feel more at ease with having Jeremy as a son-in-law?

Tabitha pushed herself on her swing, crying out in alarm when she felt hands cover hers on the rope. She looked up, laughing, when she saw

Jeremy's smiling face looking down at her.

"Why must you always give me a fright?" she complained.

"Because I love your adorable expression. May I push you?"

"I suppose so, but I should really scold you. Why have you left your party?"

"Do you not wish to have me by your side?" he asked.

"Do not put words in my mouth, Mr Gibbs," she told him sternly, smiling to take the bite out of her words. "Of course, I love being with you, but you do know that the feast is mainly for you."

"I know, and your father can handle it. He seems to be enjoying it more than I am."

Tabitha nodded. "Papa does love a good party. Did you sneak away as I did?"

"No, I came with your father's blessing."

"I find that surprising. I thought he would have kept you tied up with his friends for hours to come."

“He might have, but he knows I have something important to do,” Jeremy said.

Tabitha felt he was telling her something, but she couldn’t tell what it was. He was beating around the bush, wasn’t he?

“More important than enjoying your success?” she asked.

“Much more important.”

Jeremy began to push her, saying nothing for some time. Tabitha wanted to turn around and ask him what was on his mind, but she had a feeling he was about to do just that.

“Are you happy with me?” he enquired of her.

“That’s an odd question. Do you doubt my love for you?”

“No, but I wanted to hear you say you love me before I told you the good news.”

Tabitha did look up at him then, putting her foot out to stop her from moving. “You’re acting a little strangely. What is this good news?”

“I spoke to your father a few moments ago and gained his blessing to ask for your hand in marriage.”

Jeremy spoke so quickly that Tabitha asked him to repeat himself. Jeremy did so, this time stretching every word as his adoring eyes gazed into hers. Tabitha said nothing for several seconds before giving a shout of joy that made Jeremy chuckle.

“Do you really mean it, Jeremy?” she asked. “We can finally be married?”

“Yes, my love. I would marry you now, but we have a few necessities to get through before I can get you to the altar and make you all mine.”

This was the best news Jeremy could have given her. “I’m so happy that I could just scream.”

“Why don’t I push you so it won’t seem strange if someone hears you screaming?” Jeremy suggested.

“Make me go as high as you can,” she challenged. “I have a lot of screaming for joy to do.”

Jeremy fulfilled her wishes, laughing every time she shrieked. Tabitha had a feeling this was going to be just the beginning of moments like these.

Two months later, they were married, surrounded by all the servants, family, and neighbours. Tabitha finally met Jeremy's family and instantly fell in love with them, as they did with her. She couldn't remember being so happy and had told Mandee as much during a brief moment in her room. Tabitha's only regret was not spending more time with everyone because she had a honeymoon to attend, but Jeremy assured her they would visit his family as soon as they returned.

"Where are you taking me, Mr Gibbs?" she asked as he helped her into their carriage. "You're keeping our destination very close to your chest. Not even Mandee knows."

"Do you really have to know?" her husband asked.

"Most definitely."

Jeremy shook his head. "You, my dear wife, are too curious for your own good. We're off to London to begin our honeymoon. That is all I am telling you for now."

"To begin our honeymoon? So, London is not our only destination."

Jeremy climbed in after her. "No more questions, my lovely wife. Simply enjoy the surprises as they unfold."

Tabitha pouted a little, but she replaced it with a smile. “I like hearing you call me your wife.”

“That’s good because I plan to use it every day.”

“Do you promise?”

“Always.”

Tabitha sighed in contentment and settled into her seat. Could her life be any more wonderful?

THE END

Can't get enough of Tabitha and Jeremy? Then make sure to check out the Extended Epilogue to find out…

How will Tabitha feel about her husband being involved in politics?

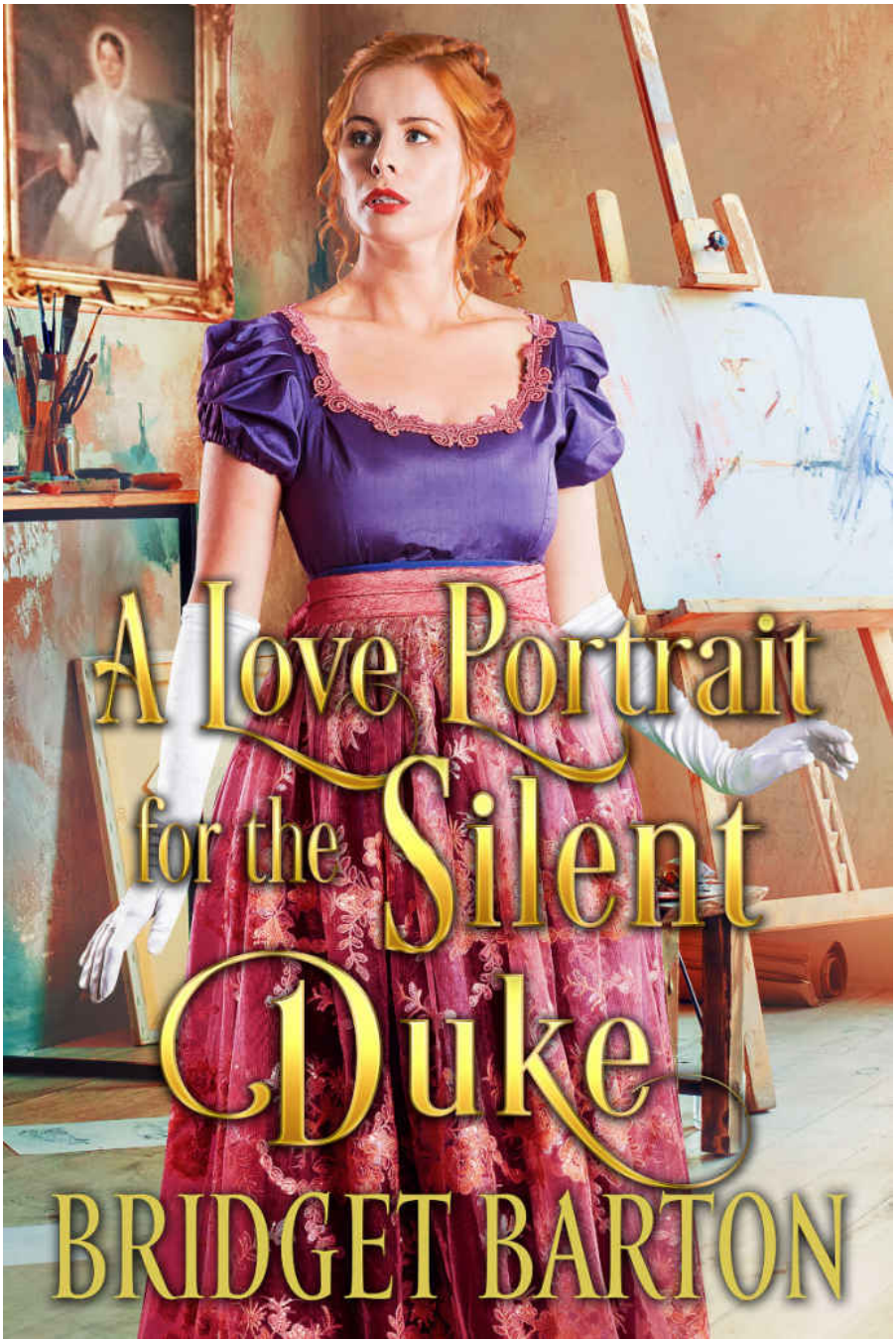
What emotional revelation will Tabitha have in store for her beloved husband?

How will Tabitha feel about returning to Surrey and seeing her lovely family, and what will be the unexpected announcement she will make?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

http://bridgetbarton.com/tabitha

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from **"A Love Portrait for the Silent Duke"**, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*


A Love Portrait
for the Silent
Duke
BRIDGET BARTON

A Love Portrait for the Silent Duke

Introduction

Following the sudden death of her beloved father, the spirited and kind Lady Selina Langley finds herself impoverished and homeless. In desperate need of an income for both her and her sister, Selina has no choice but to put her pride aside and seek employment. Luckily, she will be able to make her way in life by painting portraits for a tormented gentleman, who will draw her attention at their very first encounter. However, deep inside she knows that a match with a man of his stand and a fallen woman like her will always remain a foolish dream. With her unique talent and kindness, will Selina find the way to steal the charming nobleman's heart? In the end, will she put her struggling past behind and find true love and happiness despite the odds?

When Lord Graham Hancock, the brave and gallant Duke of Westcott, returns injured from the war, he withdraws to his own world, struggling to adjust back into society. To make matters worse, his fiancée breaks off their engagement, as she is embarrassed by his presence. She refuses to be associated with someone who lost the ability to speak, and prefers to stay aside from the crippling nightmares he now endures. Soon, everything will change for the lonely Duke, when he meets the mesmerising woman, who is hired for his portrait and is about to replace what haunts his dreams. As he spends more time with her, she gives him the hope that life is far from

over for him and he realises that she is the only person who can brighten even his gloomiest days. Will the silent Duke find a way to declare his genuine love to Selina? Or will he suppress his feelings out of fear and condemn himself into an eternal misery?

Selina and Graham's hearts start to heal when they discover that they have found everything they were looking for in each others' eyes. Everything crashes down though, when Graham's mother banishes Selina from the house and convinces his ex-fianceé to return and ask for his forgiveness. Will Graham find the heartbroken Selina and make the right decision at the most critical moment of his life by convincing her that she is the true love of his life? While external forces are threatening to steal their chance at happiness forever, will the two of them fight for their feelings and choose the path of their own life?

Chapter 1

Westcott Villa, London, 1812

The Right Honourable Lord Graham Hancock, Duke of Westcott, stared out of the rain-streaked window at the street below. Large puddles had formed where the cobbles were unevenly laid or where the stones had begun to subside, carriage wheels splashing through them and soaking anyone walking by.

Not that many people were simply walking by. More likely, they dashed along the pavement, beneath big black umbrellas, trying to avoid their own puddles or even, in some cases, the very rain falling from the sky.

A fire blazed and popped in the hearth behind Graham, and his mother, Lady Edith, the Dowager Duchess, sat in an armchair beside him. She had not uttered a word to him since breakfast time, had simply worked at her embroidery hoop, and occasionally looked up to glance out of the window. Before he had gone away to war, it was rare to see his mother in the drawing room before noon. Now she claimed she was keeping him company, but it was no different to when she had remained in her own rooms upstairs.

The clock on the mantelpiece bonged eleven times, indicating that the visiting hour was upon them. But as there were no young ladies in the house, no visitors were expected.

Graham sighed heavily, causing his mother to glance up from her sewing before returning her attention to the fabric in front of her once more. He leaned forward slightly to scratch at an itch at the nape of

his neck, then slumped back heavily into his chair.

I am so bored! he thought to himself. I can't even acknowledge anyone walking by. They are all either hiding beneath their umbrellas, or they don't look up to see me at the window. He sighed again. His eyelids drooped drowsily, and he closed his eyes, allowing sleep to overcome him. After all, it was better than being bored.

A flurry of skirts and a rustle of silk beside him woke him from his nap with a start.

"Do wake up, Graham," said his mother, leaning forward and sticking her needle safely into the fabric of her embroidery. "We have a visitor." Without waiting for his response, she jumped up and moved instead to an arrangement of seats in front of the fire from where she could face the door to the room.

Graham rubbed his eyes, stretched, and looked out of the window. Sure enough, a carriage awaited at the bottom of the steps. He watched as Jackson, their butler, held an umbrella aloft to protect the lady alighting from the vehicle.

He sighed again but nevertheless stood up and joined his mother on the settee in front of the fireplace, limping slightly as he crossed the floor. Together they waited. A visitor was surely most welcome to help relieve his boredom, but perhaps not necessarily this visitor at this time. It is too soon, he thought.

The door to the room burst open, and in walked Jackson. Instead of addressing Graham, however, he addressed the dowager duchess.

“Lady Emmeline Broughton, Your Grace,” he announced, nodding his head slightly.

Lady Edith stood up and said, “Thank you, Jackson.”

The butler stood to one side as the lady duly entered the room in a rustle of pink silk. She was closely followed by a slightly older woman, somewhat dourly dressed in grey.

Lady Emmeline hesitated for just a moment before sweeping towards Graham with enthusiasm, a bright smile upon her pretty face. He merely stood stiffly to greet her, clicking his heels and bowing over her outstretched hand to kiss her gloved fingers. Then she turned to Lady Edith and curtsied before indicating the woman who had come in with her.

“May I introduce my chaperone, my distant cousin, Your Grace?” she said. “Miss Mary Broughton.”

Lady Edith nodded at the chaperone’s curtsy before the woman crept to stand against the wall. She did not sit until she was given permission.

“My dear Emmeline,” said the dowager. “You have no need of a chaperone when you are already engaged to my son. And in any case, I shall be with you the whole time.” She turned to the butler, who was waiting for further instructions. “Do take Miss Mary down to the kitchen, Jackson, and ask Cook to make her a pot of tea. Then Cook may send us a tray up.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” said the butler, bowing his head. He turned to Mary. “Do come with me, miss.” He closed the door tightly to behind them.

When she was quite certain that the butler and the young woman were out of earshot, Lady Edith said, “My dear, why on earth did you bring a chaperone?” She said the word ‘chaperone’ with a little distaste.

“She is not really my chaperone,” replied Lady Emmeline. “She is a poor cousin who has fallen on hard times. If she accompanies me as my unofficial chaperone, she has a chance to enjoy at least some aspects of polite society. I do feel so very sorry for her. It is the least that one can do.”

“You are most generous,” said Lady Edith. “Please, my dear. Do be seated.”

She indicated the settee next to Graham. When he glanced away and made a point of taking up almost the entire settee himself, the dowager adjusted and pointed to a pair of armchairs instead.

Lady Emmeline hesitated again before joining her future mother-in-law beside the fire. “How are you, my love?” she asked Graham. He shrugged his shoulders and stared into the flames of the fire. “You must tell me all about your recent journey,” she said. Still, he ignored her, this time looking to his mother for help.

Puzzled, Lady Emmeline also looked at his mother. “Did I do something to offend His Grace?”

Lady Edith patted her hand and said, “No, no. Not at all, my dear. But Lord Graham was ... injured in battle ...” She drifted off.

Lady Emmeline’s head snapped around to face him, and her big blue eyes examined him from head to foot. She turned back to his mother. “But ... but ... I do not see any injury,” she said. “What has he done?”

And there it was. Lady Emmeline, his very own intended, had automatically stopped addressing him directly and now, instead, discussed him as though he were an ignoramus. A thing. An inanimate object. Just like everyone else he had encountered since returning from France. And before she even knew the extent of his condition. Graham fixed his gaze once more on the fire as the two women talked about him as though he were not even in the room. If he listened in silence, perhaps they would forget he was there altogether.

“He has a head injury,” the older woman explained. “My poor son had only recently been promoted to major-general,” Lady Edith continued, “when he was injured on the battlefield. Of course, they did not understand how much damage had been done at the time. But his good friend Thomas Hatcher, who you know, I believe, was with him. Carried him to safety himself, he did.”

“Oh,” murmured Lady Emmeline. “Yes, I do know him. They have been friends since childhood, have they not?” When Lady Edith nodded, Lady Emmeline continued. “Thank goodness he was there. Are we able to thank Mr Hatcher for this brave deed?”

“Sadly, no,” replied Lady Edith. “Young Thomas went back to the battle, but now he is missing. Presumed dead.”

“That is dreadful,” said the younger woman.

Graham blinked at the memory of his friend. Good old Thomas, always there when he needed him. Apart from now.

“Indeed it is,” agreed the dowager.

“So ... so ... what exactly is wrong with him?” asked Lady Emmeline. She dropped her voice to a whisper. “Nothing ... too personal, I trust?”

Graham felt as though he wanted to laugh out loud, but he restrained himself, pretending instead to be stifling a cough.

“Oh no, my dear. Nothing like that,” said his mother. “Well, not as far as I am aware at any rate,” she admitted. “Although I would not expect them to tell his own mother of such an, er, ailment.”

There was a tap on the door, and a kitchen maid appeared carrying a heavy tea tray. She glanced around the room and placed the tray on the low table in front of the settee.

“Thank you, Fanny,” said the dowager. “Will you do the honours, my dear?” she said to Lady Emmeline. When Lady Emmeline nodded, Lady Edith indicated to the maid that she was dismissed.

“Would His Grace like a cup of tea?” Lady Emmeline asked his mother.

Graham tutted and shook his head lightly. I am here, you know! He wanted to shout. But no, his mother answered on his behalf.

“Yes, please, my dear. He will have it with lemon.”

But I do not want it with lemon! He felt his brow furrow with annoyance. I do not even want any tea. I would much sooner drink coffee. In fact, he would very much sooner have a glass of whiskey, but it was still too early in the day.

Once the women had finished fussing over the refreshments, Graham’s fiancée pressed his mother for more information.

“You were saying, Your Grace?” she prompted.

“Ah, yes. Well, when he came to – he was unconscious for several days – he had completely lost the power of speech.”

“You mean —”

“I mean, my dear, the events of that day literally left my son speechless!”

Graham noticed for the umpteenth time the self-satisfied look on Lady Edith’s face when she said that. He had heard his mother say it to so

many different people by now that it no longer amused him. It did not appear to amuse his fiancée either.

“That is awful,” said Lady Emmeline. “Has he seen a doctor since he has been home?”

“Yes. The family doctor consulted a specialist right here in London, who examined my son most thoroughly.”

“And what did he say, Your Grace?”

“He said that Lord Graham must have suffered a great trauma on that day and that he has been left without his voice.”

“But is there anything that can be done for him?”

Lady Edith spread out her free hand. “The doctors do not know.”

“Does this mean that he is ... simple?” asked Lady Emmeline.

Graham’s head shot around to look at her when she said that, and he immediately saw the look of shame on her face when she realised he had actually understood her. He reached out to touch her hand, but she pulled it back sharply.

“No, my dear,” soothed his mother. “He still has all of his faculties. He

can write and communicate and read. And he understands everything that is going on around him. He is also more than capable of managing the country estate and the London home, but he is happy for me to help him with that for the time being – with his complete knowledge, of course. He does not seem to remember what happened on that terrible day. He is simply unable to speak. It is a tragedy."

The look of disgust on Lady Emmeline's face told Graham that she believed it was a tragedy of quite a different meaning, and it should have broken Graham's heart. Instead, he was glad to see precisely how shallow she truly was.

"He will not be able to go out in society, then, surely?" she asked.

"There is no reason why that would be the case," said his mother. "He simply has no desire to at the moment."

Nor will I ever again, he thought to himself.

Suddenly, Lady Emmeline finished drinking her tea so quickly it would be deemed unladylike had they been in any other company than themselves. She stood up and clattered her cup and saucer onto the tray.

"Well," she said. "I had better be off."

"So soon?" asked Lady Edith. "You have only just arrived."

“I am afraid that I must. I have, er, a very pressing engagement. I cannot be late.”

“Very well, my dear,” said Lady Edith, also coming to her feet. “It was very nice to see you … was it not, Lord Graham?” She tapped his foot with her own, prompting him to also stand rather belatedly.

The dowager duchess went to the fireplace and pulled on the service cord, but their visitor was already on her way out through the door. “Do not trouble the servants,” she said over her shoulder. “I will collect Miss Mary from the kitchen and ask Mr Jackson to summon the carriage.”

And in a cloud of expensive floral scent, she was gone.

“Well,” said Lady Edith, quite clearly affronted.

Graham simply shrugged and resumed his former seat next to the window.

“I do hope she will still be coming to our dinner party later in the week,” said his mother, pulling the curtain to one side so she could watch Lady Emmeline’s carriage drive away. Then she too resumed her former seat and returned to her sewing.

Chapter 2

Graham glanced around the table at his mother's guests, for they were her guests and not his. She had not even consulted him. Yet the dinner party had been foisted upon him anyway, regardless of whether or not he wanted to attend.

As the conversation buzzed around him, he allowed himself to drift off. He had suffered a bad dream during the night, reminding him of the terrors and the devastation of war. He had been wandering on the battlefield looking for his friend, Thomas. The ground had been littered with dead bodies, but they were in French uniforms and not British. Every time he'd turned a body over, he'd seen a face he recognised but could not place. The same face, over and over again.

He shook his head to rid his mind of the non-memories and tried to tune in to those around him. The elderly Lady Ponsonby, to his right, was talking to the middle-aged fop Lord Oberon facing her, telling him all about her current digestive disorder.

"The wind is terrible!" she exclaimed, and Lord Oberon's face coloured beetroot red. One did not discuss such things in decent company. As if to prove her point, Graham heard a most unladylike noise coming from the woman's person. He wafted a hand in front of his face and then pretended to be rubbing his nose while coughing quietly into his palm, and he turned his attention to the lady on his left.

Lady Chesterton was facing her husband, Lord Chesterton, so they were speaking with other guests. She was telling the chap on her other side about their extensive wine cellar back at home while her husband flirted openly with the woman opposite Graham, who happened to be Lady Emmeline herself. He could not hear what they were talking

about, but she did look as though the lord was being quite risqué in some of his comments.

In a bid to distract her and rescue his fiancée from her plight, he coughed loudly into a napkin and reached under the table with his foot to tap her own, hoping he was not tapping Lord Chesterton's foot by mistake. The lord might mistake it for Lady Emmeline's foot and think that his luck was in.

As Graham's foot made contact, Lady Emmeline appeared to jerk in her seat, which suggested to him that his aim had been accurate. He coughed again, and when she looked across at him, realising who was kicking her under the table, the expression on her face changed from one of surprise to one of gentle gratitude.

She excused herself from her conversation with the lord and looked directly across the table at Graham. Lord Chesterton turned his own attention to the beauty to his right, Graham's aunt, his late father's half-sister Freda, who was actually the same age as Graham himself.

"Tell me, Your Grace," Lady Emmeline said to him. "Are you enjoying the dinner party?"

Graham pulled what he hoped was an appreciative face and nodded that yes, he was indeed doing so. If she kept it to questions that required either a yes or no answer, they would be fine.

"How have you been spending your time since we were last in each other's company?" she said, spoiling it.

At a loss for what to do, Graham simply shrugged his shoulders, and a flash of irritation crossed her face.

She looked as though she gave some thought to re-framing her next question and said, “Have you been out at all?”

He shook his head with relief and gestured to her with his hand as if to say, ‘and you?’

Lady Emmeline watched the gesture as a series of emotions flickered across her face, then she pressed her lips together before saying, “Of course, it has been raining since last I saw you. Nevertheless, my cousin Mary and I took a carriage around the park. Just to be sociable.” She waited as if for some response. When she remembered that none would come, she added, “There was hardly anyone else there of any note. And so we went back home.”

She visibly sagged as she breathed out a sigh, and she looked towards the ceiling as if searching for inspiration.

Graham followed her gaze and his eyes rested on the candle chandelier above the centre of the table. Each of the candles was the same length as the next, each of them completely new for today’s little soiree. They all had good flames on them with no splutters.

He spotted a spider weaving a web where the chandelier joined the ceiling, and he smiled slightly. Mother would not be happy with the staff if she saw it too, so he tore his eyes away and looked once more at his fiancée, whose own eyes were looking anywhere but at his.

He gazed towards the head of the table where his mother was seated, but she was engaged in an animated conversation with the gentleman to her right, who had a bright red nose. Everyone knew that the Duke of Kenilworth was partial to the odd drink or two, an attachment that caused the fine red lines that broke out upon his face as well as a paunch he tried to hide behind his waistcoat. It was good that his mother was distracted. If she was not watching Graham, then she would not have reason to think there was anything amiss with the chandelier. The spider was safe, for now. And so were the staff.

“You do remember my cousin, do you not, Your Grace?” asked Lady Emmeline suddenly, and Graham returned his attention to her.

What was she trying to imply? That he could not remember the young lady who had accompanied her only two days earlier? He may have blocked out memories of the battlefield, apart from the recurring dreams, but there was nothing wrong with the rest of his brain.

Irritated, he nodded his head just once before fixing his stare on the food on his plate in front of him. He could hear Lady Emmeline puffing and tutting, and from the corner of his eye, he could see her trying to attract his attention.

“Your Grace?” she enquired at last.

He lifted his face, looked right at her, and then pointedly and quite rudely turned to Lady Ponsonby on his right and tuned in to her conversation with the gentleman on her other side, Sir Nicholas, being sure to look as though he were listening intently and nodding and agreeing with all that he was saying.

Lady Emmeline tutted again and turned to Lord Oberon, who seemed

relieved that Lady Ponsonby had finally stopped regaling him with stories of her health.

“Do you agree, Your Grace?” said Sir Nicholas across Lady Ponsonby, and Graham realised he had completely ignored everything that the man had said. He was about to nod his agreement and hope it was the right response, when Sir Nicholas continued to drone on anyway as though Graham had agreed entirely. “I knew you would,” he said, pointing at Graham with his empty fork.

“Excuse me, Dowager Duchess,” said Lady Emmeline loudly, addressing Graham’s mother almost the entire length of the table away.

Lady Edith paused in her conversation and looked towards her future daughter-in-law with mild irritation.

“Forgive me for bothering you, Your Grace,” said Lady Emmeline. “But I wondered if I may have a private audience with you after we have finished eating?”

Graham’s mother considered the request, flicked her eyes to Graham and then back to Emmeline, and nodded. Then she returned her attention to the duke.

Graham glanced at each of the dinner guests seated around the table. What a strange mix they were. And then he twigged. Apart from Lady Emmeline and Aunt Freda, all the guests present were members of his mother’s whist society. No wonder he did not appear to have anything in common with any of them. And not a single one of them, apart from Lady Emmeline, exchanged more than two words with him – and only then if he were fortunate.

He stifled a yawn and glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Dessert would be here soon, and then he could go up to his chambers and hide away from everyone.

At the end of the meal, the gentlemen present looked towards Graham, and he remembered that he would have to entertain them with port and cigars while the ladies withdrew to the drawing room. He was, after all, the resident gentleman, and there were no others there who could even step up to the role. They were all friends of his mother's, and not related.

As he stood up, so too did the dowager duchess. She turned to her companion, the Duke of Kenilworth, bowed her head, and announced loudly, Gentlemen, my friend the duke will look after you all. Ladies, I will join you in the drawing room presently." There was a murmur of voices. "Lady Emmeline," she said. "Will you come with me?"

This, of course, left Graham at a bit of a loose end as all the gentlemen completely ignored him. He watched the ladies leave the room, followed by his mother and his fiancée. The duke, his mother's friend, went to the drinks cabinet as though it were second nature to him, and Graham wondered just how familiar the man was with his home. When he was certain that no one was paying him any heed, he slowly followed the ladies through the door.

The ladies swished their skirts and chatted amiably as they climbed the stairs to the drawing room, which was on the next level up in the London town house. The dowager duchess and Lady Emmeline, however, were just disappearing into the small parlour, and he

wondered what on earth his fiancée wanted with his mother.

Torn between climbing the stairs to his own chambers and this unexpected intrigue, it was curiosity that got the better of him. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the men had still not noticed he was missing. Then he stepped quietly across the hallway and stood just outside the door to the parlour.

“Will you not be joining us in the drawing room, my dear?” his mother was asking Lady Emmeline. She had swept into the parlour but remained standing, and Lady Emmeline had her back to the door.

“No, I thank you, Your Grace. I will not be staying.”

“Then what is it you wish to speak with me about?”

From his vantage point beside the door, he saw Lady Emmeline take a small letter from her bag. She handed it to Lady Edith, who looked down at it as though she had never seen such a thing before in her life.

“What is this?” asked his mother, keeping her hands folded in front of her.

“It is a letter,” said Lady Emmeline.

“And why would you write me a letter when you are perfectly capable of speaking to me, my dear?”

“The letter is not from me. It is from Papa.”

Lady Edith sneered down at the letter again, but when Lady Emmeline held it out to her, Graham’s mother cautiously took it from her hand.

Lady Emmeline started to make as though to leave, but Lady Edith stopped her.

“Please wait while I see what your dear father has to say.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” said Lady Emmeline, bowing her head and looking at the floor while Lady Edith unfolded the letter and read it.

Graham’s mother looked up at Lady Emmeline in surprise. “Do you know what your father has written to me?”

“I do, Your Grace,” admitted Lady Emmeline.

“Then, I repeat. Why the letter? Why did you not tell me this yourself?”

“Because I am a coward, Your Grace,” she admitted. “However, it is my choice. My decision. Papa merely articulated it for me in this formal manner.”

“You no longer wish to marry my son?” said Lady Edith, astounded.

The breath caught in Graham’s throat. Lady Emmeline spun around on the spot while Lady Edith saw him standing there for the first time.

“What do you think of this, my son?” asked his mother.

Graham stepped into the room and shrugged his shoulders. Then he held out his hands in an expression of ‘why?’

Lady Emmeline stubbornly pretended that she did not understand. She turned to Lady Edith with a questioning look on her face. “What is he saying now?”

“He is asking a perfectly valid question,” replied Lady Edith. “And one that I would also like to hear the answer to. Why – why? – are you breaking off what has long been an understanding between our two families? Why do you dishonour my son and this family in this fashion?”

“Well, just look at him,” the young woman complained, almost on the verge of tears now. She turned to indicate Graham with her hand. “How can I go out into society with ... with ... that?”

“That,” said Lady Edith, almost spitting out the word. “That is my son. That is Lord Graham Hancock, the fifteenth Duke of Westcott. That is a human being who fought bravely for his country and now needs all the love and compassion we can bestow. How dare you speak as

though he is an embarrassment to you?”

Graham did not wait around to hear any more. He turned on his heel and stormed from the room, taking the stairs two at a time to his chambers and slamming the door behind him. He would be neither pitied nor ridiculed. And if that was truly how Lady Emmeline felt about him, then he had been spared a terrible future.

Chapter 3

Langley Manor, Kent

Things had happened very quickly following the death of Lord Donald Langley. With no time to put his affairs in order, the heart attack had been sudden, leaving his two daughters without either a living or a dowry. Lady Alice, the younger of the two Langley sisters, had become engaged only days before their father's abrupt and unexpected demise, which was seen as a blessing at least. But, sadly, it was not to last.

Immediately following the funeral, a procession of carriages made its way sombrely from the church to the house, each led by a pair of black horses, each with a black feather on its head. The staff waited quietly and respectfully, lined up on the steps leading up to the big oak doors, heads bowed. They had on their best uniforms and black armbands. When the first carriage came to a juddering halt, the butler stepped forward to open the door and help the ladies down.

Lady Selina Langley took the butler's hand and waited for her sister to join them. Then the two of them made their way into the house, stopping at every single member of the staff to say a word or two.

"Thank you so much, Mr Inchworth," Selina said to the butler, who escorted her while Vincent, the head footman, looked after her sister. "You have been such a comfort to us both."

"Not at all, My Lady," Inchworth replied. "We all miss the master very much."

As they stepped into the large hallway, Selina shivered. It was not cold in the house. After all, it was a warm spring day. Yet there was a chill to the home all the same.

“Are you cold, sister?” asked Lady Alice.

“No,” she replied, glancing up at the staircase. “But it is as though someone just stepped on my very own grave.” Lady Alice shuddered too at the thought.

There was a small commotion on the steps outside the door, and then their cousin, and the new Lord Langley, dashed into the house, straightening his clothes as he did so. A large copper urn sat on a table, and he admired the image of his face reflecting back at him from the highly polished surface. He licked a finger and smoothed down a curl of hair across his forehead before turning his attention to the two ladies.

“It was a fine service, was it not?” he said, a little too cheerfully for Selina.

“As services go, I suppose it was,” she agreed, handing her coat to one of the maids. Her sister followed suit.

“Will you join me for a sherry in the parlour?” he asked them.

Selina shook her head. “No, thank you, cousin. We must finish our packing.”

The new Lord Richard at least had the decency to blush at her words. “I say,” he said. “There is no rush. You are welcome to stay in the house for as long as you need to.”

Selina knew he did not mean it, for he had eagerly moved into the house only the day after the old lord’s death and had told them that he had already found them somewhere to live. She did not like the situation, but what could she do about it? It was, after all, the law.

“That is very gracious of you, cousin,” she replied. “However, you will marry soon, and we must make way for the future Lady Langley. It is your home now, and you have been more than kind in granting us the use of one of the cottages.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, nodding. “It was the least I could do. Nevertheless, I would still like to share a toast with you both, in memory of your dear father, my uncle.”

Selina was about to refuse once again, but she was interrupted by her sister.

“I think that is a splendid idea,” said Lady Alice, touching Selina lightly on her arm. “And we can also wish our good cousin luck, health and wealth in his new home while we are about it. He is, after all, doing us such a good turn.”

“Yes, yes,” said Lord Richard. “I suppose I am, rather.”

“Very well,” said Selina, remembering her manners. They led the way, for the last time, to the parlour.

Langley Cottages, Kent

The cottage, whilst the biggest of the row on the very edge of the Langley estate, was still a lot smaller than they had been accustomed to and had been empty for a long time. With the help of only a single maid and a cook, also graciously granted to them by their good and generous cousin, it had taken them days to remove all of the dust covers from the furniture and give all of the rooms a good sweeping.

The curtains in every room had been taken down and hung on the washing line in the small back yard, where they all took turns in giving them a thorough beating, swiftly followed by all the rugs that were not worn too thin to keep.

Selina had chosen the room with the biggest window and the best light for her studio, and here she carefully laid out all her brushes and her paints, her rags and her canvases, her charcoals and her papers. In the corner of the room stood an old and paint-splattered wooden easel with her current work in progress propped upon it. It was a painting of her parents, sitting happily on a bench in the grounds of the manor, the large three-storey bay window at the back of the house behind them.

Unfortunately, she had not touched the painting for months, and now it too gathered dust, just like the cottage they were living in. It still needed a lot of work before she would be happy with it.

“I really ought to finish you,” she said sadly to the canvas. “You will remind us of our home as well as our parents, all of which are now lost to us.”

The row of cottages ran alongside a small track that led back up to the main house, and Selina’s studio window looked out across fields. The houses were tied to the estate for the use of the groundsmen and labourers. However, she could not see the manor from here, which was just as well as she may feel ever more homesick if she could.

Movement outside the window caught her attention. A stable hand was astride one of the chestnut mares. He slid down from her back, loosely tied her reins to the fence, and bounded towards the front door of the cottage. By the time he rapped on the door, she was already there.

“Letter for the miss,” he said, holding out his hand. “Came on the mail coach this morning.”

“Thank you, Davey,” said Selina.

He doffed his cap, turned on his heel, and jumped back up into the saddle, loosening the horse’s reins with one hand and guiding her back towards the main house at a canter. “New master told me to be quick,” he shouted over his shoulder.

Selina watched him go in a cloud of dust before closing the door and calling out to her sister.

“Are you there, Alice?” she shouted up the stairs.

Lady Alice’s face appeared over the balustrade. “Is it a letter for me?” she asked, surprised.

“Yes, but don’t lean on that balustrade. It may collapse!” replied her sister.

Lady Alice disappeared from view and then clattered without grace down the wooden staircase.

“Who is it from?” she asked, taking the letter from Selina.

“It is from your fiancé.”

A smile broke out across Alice’s face as she looked at the man’s writing before clutching the letter to her breast. Then she galloped back up the stairs and shut herself in her room.

Selina smiled too. At least one of them was able to find happiness during this very sad time. She returned to her studio and looked at the half-finished painting of her parents, but a high-pitched wail that came from above, distracted her and turned her blood to ice.

She dashed out of the studio, up the stairs, and into her sister's room. Lady Alice was sitting on her bed, holding the letter by a corner, as though it were contaminated, a look of horror on her face.

"What is it, my dear?" asked Selina, rushing to her sister's side on the bed.

"It is Sir Benedict," said Lady Alice.

"Is he unwell?" asked Selina.

"No!" wailed Lady Alice. "He is quite well."

"Then what is it, my dear?"

"He has broken off our engagement!"

"What? Why?" said Selina, making a grab for the letter, but Lady Alice snatched it away from her hand.

"Because I do not have a dowry!"

"But I am certain that our cousin will honour our father's agreement," said Selina. "Surely, he would?"

“No,” cried Lady Alice. “That is why Sir Benedict has cancelled our arrangement. Our cousin has written to him and told him there will be no dowry.” Saying it out loud seemed to drive it home for Lady Alice, for her shocked face crumpled, and the tears began to flow. “He ... says,” she gulped, “that he ... can ... not afford to marry a ... a ... pauper. We ... are ... paupers ...” she gulped again between the tears, her eyes wide, finally handing the letter over to Selina so her sister could read it for herself.

Selina quickly scanned the words, and then she read them again.

“I did not think that our cousin could be so callous,” she said, holding back her own tears of anger. She hugged her sister and rubbed her back, and wiped the tears from her face. “Come now, sister. We will not let him upset you so. If Sir Benedict has called off the engagement, then he was marrying you for the wrong reason anyway. You are better off without him. As for our cousin —”

“He is a brute!” said Lady Alice.

“Lord Richard or Sir Benedict?” asked Selina.

“Both of them!”

“Quite right,” said Selina, pulling a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress. “Now blow your nose and stop crying. Neither of them is worth this, and you must be strong.”

Lady Alice took the handkerchief and did as she was told, honking loudly into the fine fabric. She did not return the handkerchief to her sister. Instead, she squelched it into a ball and pressed it to her eyes.

"You are right," she said, trying to be dignified. She took a deep breath and then burst out crying again.

Selina cuddled her to her and rocked her, and then she said, "Come now, tell me your favourite story. That one you always like to tell."

Lady Alice heaved twice, then took a deep breath. "You mean the one about the prince and the princess?"

"Yes," soothed Selina, smoothing down her sister's ruffled hair. "In the apple orchard."

"Very well," said Lady Alice. "Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess ..." she began as the two sisters settled onto the bed against the pillows with their arms around each other and their feet on top of the eiderdown. "The princess had everything she could ever wish for. But the princess was sad, for she was so very lonely ..."

The tears threatened to fall again, but Selina proudly watched as her sister held them in check and continued to relate the tale. They whispered together about the secret orchard that the princess stumbled upon, describing the delicate pink blossoms and the heavenly scent, and about the handsome young prince she had met there for the first time.

"... And before long, it was clear that the two of them had fallen

deeply in love," said Lady Alice.

"Did they get married and live happily ever after?" prompted her sister.

"Yes, they did. And they had lots of children."

Selina brushed at her sister's hair again with her hand. "And you too will meet your prince. We both will. Perhaps one of them will be in an apple orchard such as yours."

But Lady Alice did not reply. She had cried herself to sleep and was now softly snoring.

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